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The Island in the Lake
Phyllis Eisenstein

Jerry Oltion

Dale Bailey

Marc Laidlaw

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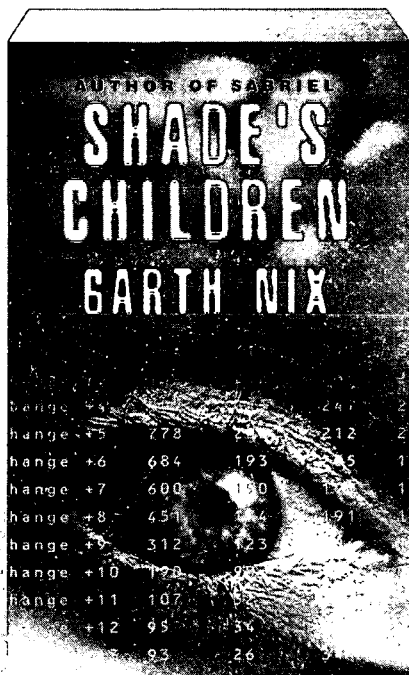
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The minstrel Alaric first graced these pages some twenty-seven years ago, in the August 1971 issue to be precise. Since then his exploits have been recounted in a story or nine and assembled into the books Born to Exile and In the Red Lord's Reach. For the past decade we haven't seen much of him—Ms. Eisenstein began to teach fiction writing at Columbia College Chicago in 1989 and has been applying lots of her creative talents to her students. (You can see the results in the Spec-Lit anthologies she has been editing recently—No. 2 has just been published.) We're happy to welcome back the bard with this tale of ghosts and magic and a poisonous lake...

The Island in the Lake

By Phyllis Eisenstein

LONG AGO, IN THE MORNING of time, the people lived in a warm and green place, where the sun had cared for them since first they opened their eyes. And life was sweet in that place, in the care of that good and generous sun. But the people were wanderers in their hearts, and at last they turned their backs on that green place, and on that good sun, and set out into the Great Night to find another home.

Their journey was long, for the darkness was vast, and homelands were as tiny and lost in it as flowers on the grassy plain. But the Pole Star had looked upon them in that darkness, and finding them worthy, he claimed them for his own, and guided them safe to this sun and this place. Yet when they came to their new home, it was not a land such as they had known before. No, it was a land strange and beautiful, a land where magic grew in every meadow, and flowed in every river, and breathed in the very wind. And foolishly, they destroyed that magic, and made the land over in the image of their old home, which they had left so far behind

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in the Great Night. And they were happy in their new home, not understanding what they had done.

But the Pole Star, who loved them in spite of their folly, preserved that magic in a few hidden places, and laid a net of his own power over land and sea, that the magic might be protected and perpetuated, forever living. And the Pole Star gave the knowledge of that magic to those who chose to dwell in his own favored domain, to hold and to use to ease their hardships. For they are wanderers, as the people were once wanderers every one, and the Pole Star has claimed them before all others. And the sign of that gift is the promise of the sun — that no matter how great the night grows, there will always be a dawn.

—Song of the World's Beginning
(among the People of the North)

Alaric the minstrel paused at the crest of the hill. To his left and right, a line of hills stretched as far as the eye could see, but before him, to the west, the land sloped downward gently to a broad, flat plain. Upon that plain lay an irregular grid of ocher fields, their grain all reaped, only the yellow stubble of barley, wheat, and oats left to dry in the last warm days of the year. The two dozen dwellings of the peasants who worked those fields were clustered together into a village near the center of that grid; Alaric could just make out their stone walls and thatched roofs, and the stone fences of the animal pens that flanked them. Farther on, much too far from the village to be a comfortable walk for fetching water, was the lake, shining like burnished silver under the autumn sun. The Lake of Death.

The day had been hot, even so late in the year, and Alaric was stripped to the waist, his face shaded by the wide-brimmed hat he had plaited from the sparse wayside grass. Slung over one shoulder was his knapsack, with only a cloak and a shirt and some scraps of bread inside; over the other was his lute, the minstrel's boon companion. The strange and magical north lay far behind him — the great glacial waste, the lodestone mountains, the witchcraft of a woman who read men's souls and of her elixir that healed the dying and could even raise the dead. Lately, he had moved through less exotic lands, through arid hills cloaked in scrub, their infrequent streams shallow and meandering over pebbly beds, their scattered inhabitants

scrabbling to draw a living from the parched soil. Yet in those lands he had heard again and again of a bountiful plain beside a mirror-bright lake, a place where a strong lord ruled and enemies had never conquered. A place where the people used water from that lake as their weapon — water that killed what it touched.

The first time he heard the tale, Alaric knew that a minstrel whose stock in trade was legend and wonders would be a fool to pass it by.

He could have reached it earlier in the year. He could have used his witch's power to leap from horizon to horizon, from village to village, tracking the place down in a matter of days. But he had walked instead, as an ordinary man would walk, because this was the south, where the cry of *witch* made folk strike out at what they feared. And he had walked, too, because he was in no great hurry to see what lay beyond the next hill as long as there were listeners for his songs before it. Barely nineteen summers old, he had lost everything in his life, or abandoned it, and now nothing called him to one place over another. Nothing but curiosity.

The track he followed to the hilltop had been broad and rutted, but overgrown, as if little used in recent times. As it descended among the fields, though, it became a real road, cleared of weeds and graded smooth. It led directly to the village and on past, to the lake shore, where it became a stone causeway linking that shore with an island in the very center of the water. The island was a small one, and occupied entirely by a single building, a high-walled fortress with pennons flying from its many turrets — the fortress of the lord of the Lake of Death.

Alaric had not even reached the village when he saw two stocky, middle-aged men and a boy of nine or ten walking toward him. They were dark-haired and sun-browned, dressed in sleeveless gray tunics and breeches, and they strode fearlessly toward the stranger. Before they were near enough to ask his business, he halted, doffed his plaited hat, and bowed low. The lute slid from his shoulder, and he caught it with one curled arm and strummed a chord as he held it against his bare chest.

"Greetings, good sirs!" he called. "Alaric the minstrel, at your service with songs for every mood and every season!"

They halted a few steps away, and the men smiled, but the boy just stared at the lute, wide-eyed, as if it were some unknown animal.

"A long time since a minstrel came this way," said the shorter of the

men; he had the guttural accent Alaric had become accustomed to in these western lands. He laid an arm across the boy's shoulders. "Not since before my son was born."

Alaric answered the man's smile with his own. "So much the better for me. Thirsty folk drink deep and are usually kind to the water-bearer."

The man laughed then. "Well, I suppose there will be quite a few thirsty folk, when they discover that water has arrived. I hope your water is sweet, my friend."

"Always," said Alaric.

"We have both kinds of water here," said the boy. "Sweet from the springs and bitter in the lake."

His father laughed again, and the other man joined him. "The child is a little young to understand figures of speech. But he tells the truth. And you should be warned — don't try to drink the bitter water of our lake. It would ruin your voice, and the rest of you, forever."

"I've heard something like that," said Alaric.

"Good," said the man. "I wouldn't want to think that the tale has died in recent years. For it's as true as it ever was. Anyone who touches that water, who so much as dips a hand in it, hardly has time to regret the act."

"And yet they say you toss it at your enemies. Can you avoid touching it yourselves when you do that?"

"We have pumps," said the boy, "and special clothing."

His father shook his shoulder gently, as if to silence him. "We have been here a long time, minstrel," he said. "We know how to live with the water in the Lake of Death."

Alaric glanced at the lake, at the island in its center. "I see that."

The man nodded. "My Lord Gazian lives there. Come now, minstrel. I am the headman of this village, and Taskol is my name. And these are my son Yosat and my brother Adeen. Come to our home and sing for us, and we'll reward you according to your merits."

Alaric grinned. "Then I look forward to a fine reward. But should I not pay my respects to Lord Gazian first of all?" He gestured toward the fortress.

"Oh, he's a busy man. He wouldn't have time to hear a minstrel until much later in the day. You can sing for the village this afternoon and for him this evening." And when Alaric still hesitated, he added, "I think you

should prove yourself to lesser folk before being allowed to entertain such a great man, don't you?"

Alaric strummed a chord on his lute, and then another. "Are you perhaps afraid he'll keep me to himself and not let you listen if I go to his castle first?"

Taskol shrugged. "He is a man who likes the best of things. And he deserves them, of course, for he keeps us safe. But as headman, I must look out for my villagers, in my own small way. Surely you understand."

"I don't wish to offend such a great man," said Alaric.

"I will escort you to him myself this evening," said the headman.

Alaric looked at him for a long moment. There had been trouble once or twice in his life over such matters of courtesy. Not so long ago, men-at-arms had been sent to terrorize a peasant family that had kept Alaric from their lord for a single night. But looking at the village headman, at his son and his brother, Alaric saw no uneasiness, no sign of fear of the man who lived in the middle of the Lake of Death. "I would like to rest my legs a little before crossing that causeway," he said at last.

"Indeed you shall," said Taskol. "I wager you've walked a fair distance today."

Alaric nodded.

"And some ale would not go amiss, would it?"

"Indeed it would not."

The headman's hut was the largest of the village, and the only one with a door of wood rather than hard-tanned leather, though the wood was old and weathered. Inside, there was hardly any wood at all. Where settee and chairs might have stood in another household, this one offered stone stools and a stone bench, roughly shaped and thickly cushioned with straw mats. Even the bed in the corner had not the simplest wooden frame to raise it above the hard-packed earthen floor; it was a mere straw pallet, though a thick one, draped with a woolen blanket. Of all the furniture, only the tabletop was made of wood, as weathered as the door, and resting on stone pillars instead of legs. And in the fireplace, dried dung smoldered beneath the big cookpot. There was plenty of straw and stone and dung around the Lake of Death, Alaric realized, but not a single tree.

Taskol's wife brought ale, and when the minstrel had quenched his thirst, he sat outdoors on another straw-cushioned stone bench and

entertained the village with songs of the ice-choked Northern Sea and the deer-riding nomads who hunted on its shores. Nearly a hundred listeners crowded the space beside the headman's home, standing, sitting on the stone wall that penned his sheep and cows, squatting on the dusty ground — the whole of the village, Alaric guessed, from the eldest graybeard to the smallest babe in arms. He made them laugh first, with the tale of the herder boy who discovered that his deer could speak and was disbelieved until he revealed some of the embarrassing human secrets that the deer knew; and then he made them gasp at the tale of the nomad who tried to save his people from starvation by hunting the huge and terrible Grandfather of All Bears. Afterward, when the crowd had dispersed with many an appreciative word, Taskol served him fresh bread and new butter and admitted that his skill was great enough for the lord of the Lake of Death.

"But remind him, please, that we of the village like music, too," he said. "So that he does not keep you entirely to himself."

Alaric savored the crusty, still-warm bread. "I will do what I can," he said between bites.

"I suppose I must deliver you to him, then. If you are ready..."

"Is there bread like this on the island?" asked the minstrel.

"There is the best of everything on the island," the headman replied.

Alaric downed a last draft of ale to clear the butter from his throat, then drew the dark shirt from his knapsack and slipped it on. "I am ready."

The lake shore was a broad, barren margin, marked at the water's very edge with a thick pale crust, like hardened foam. The causeway, made of fine, squared blocks of stone so white it dazzled the eye, began well before this crust and rose smoothly till, where it entered the water, it stood a man-height high above the surface. Broad enough to accommodate two wagons abreast, it ran arrow-straight to the island, broken by two gaps, each spanned by a heavy, iron-banded drawbridge. At the very gate of the fortress was a third bridge, guarded by a spearman in bossed leather armor. Taskol identified Alaric to the man, and the two were admitted.

Inside the gate was a courtyard large enough to hold half the houses in the village.

"This is a strong citadel," Alaric said, looking up at the high, crenelated walls. Only a handful of armed men stood at the crenelations,

scanning the world beyond the lake. At any other castle, there would be dozens. "It's given you safety for quite a long time, I would think."

"For my lifetime, and my grandfather's, and more," said Taskol. "No one living remembers the last time we had to lock ourselves inside these walls for a siege. Of course, the lake is our true defender."

"I would hate to fall off that causeway."

Taskol nodded. "So would I."

"Has anyone?"

"Not lately."

Alaric glanced over his shoulder. Beyond the gate, the lake lapped gently at the pure white sides of the raised stone road. "What would happen if someone did?"

"No one could save him. Within a few heartbeats, the flesh would begin to shred from his bones, and then the bones themselves would begin to dissolve. It's an ugly sight."

Alaric shuddered. "You've seen it?"

"When I was a child, we chased a fox off the causeway. It floated, for a short time, while the water worked on it." He shook his head. "Poor hapless fox. Normally, animals stay away from the lake. They know what it holds."

Looking up at the walls again, the minstrel said, "How strange to live surrounded by...that." Then he smiled a slow smile. "I'll make a song of it, if I can."

Taskol smiled back. "I think that would not displease my lord." He pointed to the doorway of the keep, at the far end of the courtyard. "I imagine he awaits his dinner just now. If I introduce you, he might invite me to stay for the meal."

"By all means, then, introduce me."

The great hall of the keep was not so large as some Alaric had visited, but it was one of the most luxurious, at least at first glance. High, narrow windows admitted the afternoon sunlight, showing the walls hung with tapestries, the stone floor scattered with carpets and furniture of velvet and fine-carved wood. Only on closer inspection, as he walked the length of the chamber, did he see that the carpets were worn almost to their backings in many places, the tapestries were moth-eaten, the velvets thinnapped and shiny, and the fine woods dry and cracked. The riches of the citadel were of an earlier generation, and had not been renewed. He

realized that more than a few seasons must have passed since that overgrown road had known much traffic.

Yet there was newer wealth here, even so. The trestle table at the far end of the room, ancient as it appeared, was heavy laden with fresh bread, meats, and vegetables, with butter, cheese, and ale. And the two men who sat behind it were dressed well enough, in supple leather, light wool, and golden chains. They looked like brothers, both dark and strong-jawed, though one was much older than the other.

Taskol bent the knee before them, and Alaric imitated him.

"My lord," said Taskol, "I beg to present Alaric the minstrel, lately come into our land to offer his songs for our pleasure."

The older of the two men pushed his chair back and rose to his feet. "It has been long and long since a minstrel came to this land. You are welcome, sir." But he said the words gravely, without any smile. He was a tall man, and broad with muscle, though his hair was touched with gray and there were deep lines carved about his mouth and across his forehead, and dark pouches beneath his eyes. "As you see, we are dining. Join us, minstrel, and afterward show us your wares. We would welcome something new." He sat down again. Then he added, "Stay, too, Taskol. You threshed the grain that made this bread."

Taskol bowed. "I thank you, my lord."

He and the minstrel took places on a bench at one end of the table, and they ate well of the viands spread before them. From time to time, other leather-clad men entered the hall, made their obeisances, and sat to the meal, but none of them stayed long, and none of them wore gold. Alaric recognized one as the guard of the gate.

Two young serving women cleared the table and set out more ale to signal the end of dinner. They eyed Alaric curiously but said nothing, only hurried off when they were done, to a door that stood at a corner of the hall, between two tapestries. They did not close themselves away behind it, though, but stayed in the open doorway, looking at him, and other men and women crowded there with them, half a dozen or more. The castle servants, Alaric thought, waiting for whatever novelty the stranger was about to provide.

Lord Gazian waved at him to proceed. Pushing his bench away from the table, Alaric settled the lute on his lap. There was a song he had been

working on for quite some time, and he thought it was ready for singing now — a tale of darkness for half the year and light for the rest, of blossoms growing from the very ice at the pole of the world and spawned by seeds fallen from above the sky, from whose leaves a curing elixir could be made. In the song, a young man fought storms and monsters and the Northern Sea itself to reach those blossoms, for his beloved lay ill, and not even the wisest healer knew another way to keep her from death. When he had won through and saved her, and they had celebrated their wedding in the final verse, the listeners at the doorway clapped their hands and chattered among themselves until their lord cast a single dark glance in their direction.

"A well-sung song," he said, "but I like not the subject matter. Sing of something real, minstrel."

Alaric almost said that the elixir was real enough, though the monsters were inventions, but he caught himself and bowed his head. He had no proof, just his word, and he had learned over the years that it was rarely healthy to contradict a nobleman, even with proof. He sang another song, a comic one of squabbling neighbors and stolen sheep, and of a man who was fooled into counting his sheep three times and reckoning a different number at each. Before he was done, the folk at the doorway were laughing, and even Lord Gazian himself had smiled a little.

"You have much skill," he said. "And your songs are...interesting. You could make your fortune in some large and powerful household, but instead you've come here to these remote and sparsely peopled lands." He sat forward, leaning his elbows on the table, the cup of ale between his hands. "What brings you to us, minstrel?"

Alaric bowed again. "Nothing, my lord, but a boundless desire to see the world and add to my stock of songs. Those songs are my fortune, and an easier one to carry than any gold."

The younger man spoke for the first time. "You are brave to come here, sir minstrel. Unless Taskol has not told you of the lake..." He looked narrowly at the headman.

"I had already heard, in far-distant places, and he told me as well," said the minstrel. "But I think I am less brave than the folk who live here. I would not wish to try this lake during a storm, when the deadly waves splash high."

"These stout walls protect us," said Lord Gazian. "And we take care. It has been many a year since one of our own was claimed by the lake."

"Still, I see high courage in living here. You and your people have all my admiration."

"Enough admiration," said the younger man. "Sing another song."

Gazian looked at his companion for a moment, and Alaric saw a flicker of anger pass between them before the lord of the castle turned back and said, "Go ahead, another song."

Another song led to another, and at last the sunlight in the high windows reddened and faded, and tripod oil lamps were lit to take its place. Finally, Alaric pleaded weariness after a long day of walking and said that he would sing again the next day, if desired.

Lord Gazian nodded and rose abruptly from his place at the table. "You have our thanks, minstrel, for this afternoon's entertainment. My brother will see that you are made comfortable for the night." He nodded to the younger man and, without waiting for any acknowledgement, crossed the room to a tapestry-fringed archway in the farther wall. Stairs were visible beyond the arch, and in a moment, he had climbed out of sight.

The younger man rose, when his brother had gone, and he came around the table to stand above the minstrel. "You sing well, young minstrel. What was your name?"

"Alaric, my lord."

The man's mouth tightened for a moment. "I am not known as *lord*," he said. Then he made a peremptory gesture toward the doorway that was still crowded with servants, and the two young women came scurrying. "Make him a pallet in the kitchen," he said, and turned away. With a swift stride, he went out to the courtyard.

Alaric glanced at Taskol. "Have I insulted him?" he asked.

Taskol shrugged. "Master Demirchi is the heir. But while his brother lives, there is only one lord here — we haven't room for more in our little land. I'm sorry, minstrel; I should have thought to warn you. We call him *sir*."

"I will do that, then, and hope he forgives a stranger. Though I've never before met a man who didn't like being addressed above his station. What would he have done if I had called him *majesty*?"

Taskol laughed and shook his head and led the way to the kitchen, while the serving women trailed behind.

The kitchen was a small room, dominated by a great fireplace and crowded with worn trestle tables and deeply grooved butchers' blocks, with cauldrons and platters and roasting spits. It was also a warm room, but now that darkness had fallen and cool night air had begun to slide through the high windows of the keep, that warmth was pleasant enough. The kitchen servants made Alaric a pallet near the embers of the hearthfire, and they left a few choice tidbits from dinner on a table nearby, in case he woke hungry in the middle of the night. Taskol packed a few of those tidbits into a sack, to take home to his family, before he bade Alaric good night. Then he and the servants put out the lamps and left the minstrel to sleep his first sleep surrounded by the Lake of Death.

Alaric lay on his back for a time, staring up at the kitchen's single window, far above his reach. He could see a few stars there, for the red glow of the embers was not enough to drown them out. The window was much too high, he told himself, to be touched by the waves, even in the wildest storm. And there was no storm tonight, just a gentle autumn breeze. Still, he thought that if this were *his* castle, he would shutter the windows, just to be sure. Finally, he got up and took his pallet out to the empty hall and set it where there was a wall between himself and that kitchen window, and all the other windows were far away. One lamp still lit the room, leaving heavy shadows in all the corners, but Alaric had no fear of shadows. He fell asleep, an arm crooked protectively about his lute, both of them wrapped against the gentle autumn breeze in his well-worn cloak.

When he woke to a touch on his shoulder, the lamp no longer burned, and dawn twilight showed through the windows. He knuckled sleep from his eyes and blinked up at the man who leaned over him. It was Lord Gazian, wearing a dressing gown of fine, pale wool that gave his body a ghostly cast in the dimness.

"My lord?" said Alaric.

"Will you come upstairs, minstrel? There is someone who would hear you sing."

Odd though the time was, Alaric rose, knowing that no good could come of reluctance. Carrying his lute close against his body, he followed the master of the lake through the arch and up the narrow, winding

stairway beyond. At the third landing, they turned off the stair and walked along a curving corridor that was marked every ten paces by a narrow window. Through each window, Alaric could see the lake below, the water reflecting the soft, gray-pink color of the eastern sky. They had passed four windows, making nearly a half-circle, before Lord Gazian halted at a door on the inner wall. He eased it open.

The room was small, though richly hung with tapestries, and crowded by a bed, a chair, and some low chests. A bedside table held a small oil lamp, a tray of tiny pastries, and a cup. And the bed itself, wide enough for three men, held a boy of no more than seven summers, propped up on bolsters and covered with a light blanket. Even in the candlelight, Alaric could see that the boy was ill — his face was pale, with a sheen of moisture, and his dark eyes were sunk deep above his hollow cheeks. He said nothing when the lord of the castle and Alaric entered, though his gaze followed them to the side of his bed.

Lord Gazian sat down on the edge of the mattress and gently stroked the damp dark hair away from the child's forehead. "I've brought the minstrel for you." He nodded at Alaric.

"Thank you, Father," said the boy in a small, soft voice. He looked at Alaric. "I'm sorry to get you up so early. It is early, isn't it?"

"A little," said Alaric. "But I don't mind."

"Sometimes he doesn't sleep well," said his father, resting one large hand on the boy's shoulder. "And last night the servants told him about you, and he hardly slept at all for asking when you would come upstairs."

"My nurse sings to me," said the boy. "But they told me you sing much better."

"I am flattered," said the minstrel. "Do you like songs about magic?"

"Oh, yes."

"About knights and dragons and fair maidens?"

The boy's eyes widened. "Is that what you sing about?"

"Sometimes. For special listeners."

"Please," breathed the boy.

"Very well." Alaric sat down on the foot of the bed and balanced his lute on his knee. "This is the tale of a boy who grew up to fight dragons." And he launched into an old favorite in more familiar lands — the song of the youth who found an enchanted sword in a hollow tree, a sword that

itself became his teacher. By the time he finished, with the young man slaying his monster and winning the hand of a king's daughter, and the kingdom as well, the boy's mouth hung open in wonder, and there was a bit of color in his cheeks.

"Oh, another, please, minstrel," he begged.

Alaric looked at Lord Gazian, who nodded.

In the end, he sang of magical adventures until the boy's nurse came with his morning meal.

"You mustn't stop in the middle!" the boy cried. The color in his cheeks was hectic now, and his eyes were very bright.

"The child must eat," said the nurse, as she set the tray on the bed. She was a stout woman, old enough to be Alaric's grandmother, and the expression on her face was stern. She pointed to the tray of pastries, all untouched. "He's eaten nothing since yesterday noon, not even one dainty, and you have excited him on an empty stomach, as well as keeping him from sleep."

"I didn't want to sleep," said the boy.

She propped him up farther on his bolsters. "You must sleep. And you must eat. How can you ever get well if you don't sleep and eat, I ask?" She lifted a cover from a bowl of porridge and dipped up a spoonful for him.

He turned his head away from it.

"Eat a little, my son," said his father. He glanced at Alaric. "I'm sure the minstrel would say the same."

"Indeed," said Alaric. "I'll be eating this very porridge downstairs shortly, and it smells excellent."

The boy frowned, but then he nibbled at the edge of the spoon and finally swallowed the whole amount.

"A little more," said the nurse, with another spoonful.

The boy looked up at Alaric. "What is your name, minstrel?"

"Alaric."

"Mine is Ospir."

Alaric bowed. "Greetings, Ospir."

"Will you come back later?"

"If your father wishes it. The decision lies with him."

"Father?"

Lord Gazian caught the boy's small hand for a moment. "If you will

promise to eat your porridge, and to try to sleep, I'll bring the minstrel back later."

The boy sighed. "Very well, Father."

"Good child," said the lord of the castle, and he stood up. "Till later." And he gestured Alaric toward the door.

They were halfway down the stairs before Alaric asked, "My lord, what ails the boy?"

Lord Gazian kept walking. "No one knows, minstrel. He has been sickly for most of his life. He is a good boy, though, and a patient one." When they reached the foot of the steps, with the archway to the great hall before them, he stopped and turned back to Alaric. "Thank you, minstrel, for being kind to him."

"My lord, I am here to serve you. It would be poor service indeed to be unkind to your son."

The lord of the castle nodded and stepped through the arch.

They broke their fast with more than porridge — with eggs and bread spread thick with butter, with slices of fat mutton and grilled fowl, and with a drink made of soured milk that Alaric found not as attractive as plain, clear water. But water there was in plenty — from a spring, servants explained, that rose from deep within the island and never failed.

"How strange," Alaric said, "that pure water should flow in the midst of the Lake of Death."

"This land is full of such springs," said Master Demirchi. "There would be no fields without them." Unlike his liege and brother, he was fully dressed for the day, in leather and soft, thin wool. "And without the fields, we would all be elsewhere." He picked at his plate of mutton and eggs. "But I think a few people would come here anyway, just to carry off some of our deadly waters for a weapon. We are especially rich in that weapon, are we not, my brother?"

Lord Gazian cast him a sour glance. "Don't ask again," he said.

Demirchi nodded toward Alaric. "The minstrel has traveled the world. Speak to him about it."

"I don't wish to speak about it. I've made my decision."

Demirchi peered with slitted eyes at Alaric. "How much gold do you think an outsider would pay for a few sealed containers of water from the Lake of Death?"

-----Alaric looked from one man to the other: "I don't know, sir. Perhaps-----
it is too dangerous to transport elsewhere."

"Nonsense," said Demirchi. "We know how to deal with it."

"We have no need of outsiders' gold," said Lord Gazian.

With two fingers, Demirchi lifted the gold chain that hung at his throat. "This may be enough for you, but it won't buy new carpets for this room, or furniture, or weapons. I want a new sword; must I trade my only chain for it when a cask of water would suffice?"

Gazian set the flats of both hands on the table. "I will not sell death, and that's an end to it. When you rule here, *if* you rule, you may decide otherwise. Till then, we will leave off speaking of it."

"My brother, you are not thinking to our advantage."

Gazian looked at him for a long moment, and then he said, "I know you have many responsibilities to attend to today. I would not keep you from them."

Demirchi made a disgusted noise and then stood up and strode from the room.

The lord of the castle and the visiting minstrel were both quiet for a time, eating. Shortly after Demirchi left, a couple of other men came in and sat down to partake of the meal, and seeing the frown that lingered on their lord's face, they said little and excused themselves quickly. Alone with Gazian again, Alaric was unsure of what to do. At last, he said, "Shall I sing for you, my lord?"

Gazian looked up from the remnants of his meal. There was tiredness in his eyes, in the slope of his shoulders. "You must be weary, minstrel, from waking so early. There is an empty chamber upstairs, just beyond my son's room. Perhaps you would like to take your pallet up there and sleep a bit more. Tell one of the servants I said to help you with it. You can sing again later."

"You are kind, my lord."

He shook his head. "I think not, but I thank you for being so willing this morning. Go on. Rest."

"As you will," said Alaric.

Rather than disturb the servants, who all seemed busy enough, Alaric took the pallet upstairs himself. Half a dozen steps past young Ospir's door was another; he pushed it open.

At first he thought he must be in the wrong chamber, for this one was not at all empty. Illuminated by a single narrow window, it was fully three times the size of the boy's bedchamber, and richly furnished. The floor was almost entirely covered by a single large carpet, and the walls were hung partly with tapestries and partly with thick velvet curtains. A velvet settee stood in the center of the carpet, with a pair of finely carved tables flanking it and a needlework footstool before it. On one wall was a fireplace of white stone, and against the other was a wide bed made up with fine pillows and quilts.

Alaric backed out the door, to see if he had missed the room he was supposed to find. But this one was indeed beside the boy's, and the corridor ended in a blank wall after it.

Inside again, he laid his pallet on the floor beside the settee and made a circuit of the room. The fireplace contained no trace of wood or dung or ash, just a naked grate. The carpet, the tapestries, the settee and tables were worn much as the furnishings of the great hall were worn, but all were covered with a thin layer of dust. The bed was dusty, too, and stale-smelling, as if the bedclothes had not been aired in a long time.

There was a chest at the foot of the bed, half covered by the quilt, with no lock to keep a curious minstrel out. Alaric turned the quilt back and lifted the wooden lid. Immediately, the sweet scents of cedar and lavender wafted up at him, the one lining the chest, the other sprinkled over the contents as dried blossoms. A woman's clothing was packed inside — linen and lace and embroidery, all heavily creased from lying long undisturbed. Alaric closed the lid again, and draped the quilt back over it. Whoever's clothes they were, he thought, she had not worn them in quite some time.

He moved his pallet nearer the window and looked out for a moment. It was a beautiful view, if one ignored its deadliness — the lake shining like polished metal, the fields spread out in a golden array, the sky clear and cloudless above the line of hills on the horizon. He imagined her, whoever she was, sitting on the windowsill and gazing out, perhaps with embroidery in her hands. And then he realized he was thinking of other castles, other hands, other embroidery left far behind, and he turned his mind away from them. No one had sat on this windowsill lately, for it was as dusty as everything else in the room. He lay down on the pallet and closed

his eyes. He was tired, as Lord Gazian had known, and he fell asleep quickly.

A rough hand on his arm brought him out of jumbled dreams of the past. For a moment he thought Lord Gazian must be shaking him, and then he looked up and recognized Ospir's nurse.

"What are you doing here, minstrel?" she demanded.

Yawning, he stretched his arms out above his head. "Lord Gazian told me to sleep here."

"Did he?" She loomed over him, hands on her hips, suspicion on her face and in her voice. Then, less sharply, she said, "Well, I suppose if you had come here without permission, you would have closed the door. But to send you to *her* room." She clucked her tongue.

"Whose room is it?" asked Alaric.

"His lady's, of course. What other room would be so near the boy's?"

"Yours."

"Not a room like this," she said indignantly. "Mine is on the other side, and befitting my station. This is a finer chamber than even Lord Gazian's own."

"But Lord Gazian's lady doesn't live in this chamber," said Alaric.

The corners of the nurse's mouth turned down. "She died giving my lord an heir." And she nodded toward the wall behind which Ospir lay.

"And Lord Gazian never took another wife?"

She shook her head. "None could compare to *her*. He loved her, minstrel." She laid a hand on the back of the settee and stroked the worn velvet. "Many was the time they sat here together, and I brought them dinner, just the two of them here in this room. It seems so long ago. I air the room sometimes, just for the memory of her. Poor lady."

Alaric sighed, thinking how often love led to unhappiness in the real world. Far more often than in song. "A sad tale," he said.

She looked at him sharply. "One you could put to music, I suppose, just one tale among many. I heard about your tales from the other servants. Fancies and lies, most of them, it seems."

"Some. Others have a bit of truth to them."

"A small bit, I'd think. But the boy likes them — I'll say that for you."

"That pleases me," said the minstrel. He glanced out the window,

saw that the sun was high; he had slept most of the morning away. "Is he awake now?"

She had already turned toward the door, but she paused at his question. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

"I thought I would visit him before going downstairs, if he were awake."

"His uncle is with him."

"Master Demirchi?"

"He has only the one uncle."

Alaric pushed his covering cloak aside and got to his feet. "I was told yesterday that Demirchi was the heir. But you just said it was the boy. Surely this land isn't large enough for two."

The nurse lowered her voice. "No one expects the boy to live out the winter. He has never been well, not since his babyhood, and two years ago my lord decided that another heir must be named."

"Poor child," murmured Alaric.

"He is a good boy," said the nurse.

"Will Master Demirchi stay long with him now?"

"He never stays very long."

"Then I will wait."

His lute under one arm, he followed the nurse to the door of Ospir's room and stood outside as the woman slipped in. He caught a glimpse of Demirchi sitting on the bed, holding the boy's hand, and then the nurse closed the door again. Shortly, Demirchi came out.

"He is eager for your songs, minstrel," he said, "but I beg you not to tire him. He has little strength these days."

Alaric bowed. "It must be hard to lie in bed for so much time, sir. I only desire to make it a bit easier for him."

Demirchi nodded. "We will see you later in the great hall?"

"Of course, sir. I am here to sing for all who will listen."

"At dinner, then." He walked off down the corridor.

Inside the room, Ospir greeted Alaric in his small, soft voice. "Thank you for coming back so soon."

"I had some porridge and took a nap, which I hope you did as well, and now I am ready for a little more music."

"He ate and slept," said the nurse. "He has been a good child this morning."

"And my uncle came to visit," said Ospir. "I wish he had stayed longer. He always makes me laugh. But you are here, and that makes up for his going."

Alaric sat down on the edge of the bed. "Well, I will try to make you laugh, too, if your nurse does not mind."

The woman waved a hand, as if in permission, and Alaric began a long, complicated song about a wolf who tried to trick eight sheep into leaving their fold to run away with him. By the time he was done, the boy was laughing, and the nurse was as well. But in the midst of his laughter, Ospir began to cough, a deep, hollow cough, and when he could not stop, his nurse had to help him sit up, and she rubbed his thin chest until at last the spasms passed. By that time he was half-fainting, and as he fell back on the pillow, a trickle of blood started from a corner of his mouth. The nurse swabbed his sweaty forehead and wiped the blood away with a damp cloth.

"I think you should go now, minstrel."

"No," gasped the boy, his voice smaller than ever. "Please." He closed his eyes, and he was so pale, and his breathing became so shallow, that Alaric thought he must be dying that very moment.

"Shouldn't we call his father?" he asked the nurse.

Then Ospir's eyes opened, and the look in them was beseeching. "I'll be all right," he whispered. "Please sing."

The nurse nodded to Alaric. "Something more serious."

And so Alaric returned to songs of knights and fair maidens, of sorcerers and monsters, and of lands beyond the horizon. He sang softly, though, and after a time he left a song unfinished, because he knew the boy slept.

The nurse walked with him into the corridor and closed the door gently between them and the child.

"I'm sorry," said Alaric. "I didn't know."

The nurse shook her head. "He has had congestion of the lungs before, but never so bad. They die sometimes, after the blood comes. And he is very weak, poor child." She looked down at her hands, which were clenched in the voluminous fabric of her skirt. "I shall call his father now."

Alaric trailed after her to the great hall, where Lord Gazian sat talking with two men in bossed armor. When informed of his son's condition, he

directed the two to find his brother, and then he went upstairs. Master Demirchi came in from the courtyard a short time later and went up, too. Neither man asked Alaric to come along.

He went to the kitchen for a time, and listened to the talk among the servants. None was surprised that the child was so gravely ill; they had been expecting his death for two years already. They speculated on how long the mourning period would be, and then they asked Alaric to sing, because there might not be much singing allowed when the household was in mourning. Finally, Alaric went upstairs, though unbidden, to see what he could see.

The door to the boy's chamber stood ajar, and inside both Gazian and Demirchi sat on the bed, on opposite sides, and the nurse hovered near. That left little space for another visitor, so he did not attempt to enter. He could see, though, that the boy was awake, with one hand held by his father and the other by his uncle. None of them seemed to notice Alaric standing in the corridor.

Silently, he slipped on down the passageway to Ospir's mother's chamber. Entering, he shut the door quietly but firmly, and then he bolted it. He laid his lute on the settee.

The strange and magical north lay far behind him, and in it the elixir so powerful that it brought the dead back to life. He had never intended to return there, never intended to revisit Kata the witch, who brewed that elixir, but now he knew that he must.

A heartbeat later, he stood on a mountainside above the northern valley that was now her home. The air about him was suddenly crisp with the northern autumn, and he shivered a little as he scanned the valley floor. He looked past the harvested fields and the peasant dwellings, past the great fortress that guarded all and the people who walked its battlements and strolled in and out through its gate. He looked, finally, to the shore of the river that had created the valley, and there he saw the tent, figured all over with the symbol of the sacred Pole Star, that belonged to Kata. A moment later, he was thrusting aside its entrance flap and stepping into her firelit domain.

She sat cross-legged by the fire, a grinding stone upon her lap, a pestle in her hand, the bags and bundles that held her possessions piled all around her. Her thick, dark braids brushed her knees as she bent over her work,

the smooth muscles of her slender arms flexed beneath their load of leather bracelets. When she looked up, and her eyes met his, there was not the slightest trace of surprise in her face.

"Greetings, my Alaric," she said in the soft, lilting accent of the north. "You return to us."

He shook his head. "No. I only come to ask a favor."

She smiled a little. "If you wish a favor, you must give one in return."

He sat down beside her. "This is not for myself. It is for a child."

One of her eyebrows rose. "Whose child?"

"Not mine. The child of my host, far to the south. He is sick, perhaps near death, and I would help him."

"Ah, soft-hearted Alaric. Has your softness not found you enough trouble in your life? Had you stayed in the north, you would have become hard, as we are hard."

"I am what I am, lady. Will you give me the elixir?"

She brushed fine dark powder from her stone into a square of muslin, twisted the cloth into a sack, and tied its mouth with a strip of sinew. "These are the leaves you helped us bring back from the Great Waste. Shall I withhold from you your share of what I make of them? It would be ungrateful of me."

"You are fair, lady. You have always been fair to me."

"How old is the child?"

"Seven, I believe, and small for his age."

She dipped into a bag and pulled out a ceramic flask the size of her fist and sealed with wax. She also found a spoon made of horn. "Give him two spoonfuls diluted in a cup of wine each day till the elixir is gone. If it can help him at all, that will be enough."

Alaric took the flask and the spoon. "Thank you, lady. Now, what favor can I offer you in return?"

She caught his wrist. "Only one, my Alaric."

He shook his head. "I can't stay."

"You will never find what you seek."

"I have given up seeking, lady."

She looked long into his eyes. "No," she said at last. "Don't fool yourself, minstrel. You will never give up. Songs and travel will never be enough for you. One day, I think, you will go back to your past, you will

not be able to resist it any longer. I hope it does not disappoint you too badly."

"I have nothing to go back to," said Alaric, and the words were thick in his throat.

"Those are only words, my minstrel." She let go of his wrist. "Is there a woman in this place you've come from? The mother of the child, perhaps?"

"No. No woman."

She smiled again and stroked his cheek with one finger. "I find that hard to believe, pretty boy."

He smiled back. "I've only been there two days."

"Then there is still plenty of time. Tell me about this place," she said. "Tell me about all your wanderings since you left us."

He looked down at the flask and the spoon. "Lady, I cannot. The child might die while I entertained you. You must understand..."

She nodded slowly. "I do understand. And you must also understand that you will always be welcome among us. Always."

"Farewell," he whispered.

An instant later he was back in the chamber next to Ospir's.

Lord Gazian, Demirchi, and the nurse were still in the tiny bedroom, and Ospir was still breathing, though laboriously, when Alaric slipped in. Demirchi was the first to look up at him. "Not now, minstrel," he murmured.

"I have an elixir which I picked up in my travels," Alaric said, showing the flask. "It has proven itself in the past in any number of grave illnesses, and I believe that it might help the boy."

Demirchi glanced at the flask. "Are you a healer as well as a minstrel, Master Alaric?"

"I've used it myself more than once. I know its power."

Demirchi shook his head sharply. "We want no unknown elixirs for the boy."

Lord Gazian looked up then. "You've taken it?" he said.

"Yes, my lord," said Alaric.

"Had you a fever?"

"A high one, my lord."

"And so has my son. Bring your elixir here."

Alaric squeezed by Demirchi and the nurse to stand beside the lord of the castle.

"Give it to me," said Gazian.

Alaric handed over the flask. "Two spoonfuls should be given each day in a cup of wine," he said. He held the horn spoon up. "This is the measure."

Gazian perforated the wax seal with his sheath knife and sniffed of the elixir. "It has a pungent smell," he said. "Harsh. Like cloves. Is it bitter?"

"Not in wine, my lord," said Alaric.

"Fetch some wine," Gazian said to Demirchi.

"Brother, what do we know of this stuff?" said Demirchi. "It might be poisonous."

"I will taste it if you wish," said Alaric.

"The wine, brother," said Gazian.

"Let me get it, my lord," the nurse said suddenly, and before anyone could object, she hurried from the room.

In a voice barely audible, Ospir murmured, "I will take it, Father."

"Good boy," said Gazian, caressing his son's cheek.

The nurse returned shortly with a carafe and a cup. Alaric measured the elixir and mixed it with the wine, and then he spooned out a mouthful and swallowed it in full sight of the others.

"What proof is this?" said Demirchi. "One spoonful of dilute poison might be harmless to a grown man, and a cup of it deadly to a weakened child."

Lord Gazian looked at his son. "We have nothing better to try," he said. "Come, my child, drink." And he held the cup to Ospir's lips.

It took some time to finish the cup, for the wine was strong for such a young child, and the elixir, Alaric knew, made it taste odd, but at last he drank it all. Then he closed his eyes and whispered, "May the minstrel sing for me?"

Gazian nodded to Alaric.

The minstrel chose a lullaby of many soft, sweet verses, and by the time he was finished, Ospir was sleeping.

Lord Gazian gestured for all but the nurse to leave, and out in the corridor, he said, "If your elixir helps him, you will be well-rewarded, minstrel."

"If it helps him, that will be reward enough, my lord," said Alaric.

Gazian took his arm. "Come down to the hall and sing for us now. I have need of diversion."

The remainder of the afternoon was a restless one. For a time, Alaric sang, and the lord of the castle and his brother listened. And for a time, other men joined them and the group played at a game with colored stones on an octagonal board. Master Demirchi got up often and went to the foot of the stairway, but Gazian always called him back, saying that word would be sent if there were anything to know. The household dined, though Lord Gazian ate little, and then Alaric sang again. Night fell, and at last the master of the Lake of Death dispatched a servant to his son's room, but the servant could only report that the boy was sleeping still.

Lord Gazian looked at his brother. "Perhaps you should see to the mourning ceremonies, in case they become necessary." He rose heavily from his chair. "I will be on the postern balcony, not to be disturbed...unless there is some word from above."

Demirchi inclined his head. "As you wish."

"Come, minstrel. I would listen to more music, if you can."

"I can, my lord."

Alaric followed him up the stairs, to the second landing this time, through a doorway, and down a broad, shallow flight of steps. At the bottom was a door heavier than any he had seen elsewhere in the castle, oak almost solid with iron banding, and fastened shut by two great horizontal beams. Gazian unbarred it with one hand, the beams swinging easily on well-oiled pivots, and pulled it open. Beyond lay a balcony open to the night sky.

There were no lamps on the balcony, but the moon rode low on the horizon, casting its silver gleam upon a space three paces deep and a dozen wide, with a hip-high wall guarding its rim. Lord Gazian went to that wall and leaned upon it with both forearms, and when Alaric joined him there, he saw that the surface of the water lay only a couple of man-heights below. The waves were calm beneath the moon, but a pale mist was rising from them, swirling in the gentle breeze. Alaric stepped back from the wall.

"No need to be afraid, minstrel," said Lord Gazian. "The waves never come this high."

"The mist," said Alaric.

Gazian shook his head. "Harmless." He looked out over the water. "Though they say the ghosts of everyone who ever died in this land are in that mist. They say the lake holds them prisoner, and they wander over its surface every night, trying to escape. I've seen them myself, whatever they are — vague figures in the distance, writhing. Sometimes I've even heard them moan. Or perhaps it was just the wind."

Alaric looked where he was looking and saw only mist, thicker here and thinner there.

"I wonder, sometimes," Gazian said, "if my lady wife is among them. And I wonder if she will be happy if our son joins her."

Alaric said nothing.

Gazian glanced at him over one shoulder. "He sleeps long. Is it the sleep that comes before death?"

"The elixir always brings sleep," said Alaric.

"It may be too late for your elixir, minstrel."

"I hope not."

He sighed. "I have not much hope left in me. Once, I had hoped to see him grow up strong to care for my people after me. I can no longer remember when anyone still thought that was possible." His head sank down between his arms. "Sing, Master Alaric. Sing of hope."

And Alaric sang, as the moon glimmered on the deadly waters and the mist writhed and twisted above them. He sang of quests successful and of love affirmed. And as the moon rose ever higher, he thought, once or twice, that he too could see vague figures in the mist, as if his music had raised them. Later, Lord Gazian dismissed him, with permission to use his lady's old bedchamber once more.

In the morning, before breaking fast, Alaric tapped at Ospir's door to make sure the nurse administered another dose of elixir. She woke the boy to do so, but he went to sleep almost immediately afterward. For the brief moments his eyes were open, he did not seem to recognize either her or the minstrel.

In the great hall, all the day was as restless as the previous afternoon had been. Halfway through, Lord Gazian sent his brother out on some errand to keep him from going to the stairway so often. He himself saw to all the myriad details of life in the castle, but offhandedly. He spurned the

game of colored stones and dismissed the men who would play it with him. And he hardly listened when Alaric sang, pacing instead, back and forth across the hall, even going out to the courtyard and up onto the battlements. He stayed on the battlements for quite some time, looking out toward the village of his peasants. He was there when a servant came running through the great hall with word that Ospir was awake, hungry and thirsty, and asking for the minstrel.

Gazian raced up the stairway. Alaric and a servant with a tray of broth and bread followed at a more demure pace.

They found the boy sitting up, supported by his bolsters, his nurse's arm, and his father's strong hands. The nurse gestured peremptorily for the tray and, choosing the cup of broth, held it to the boy's lips. He drank greedily.

"Not so fast, my darling," she said. "Small sips at first." She moved the cup away from his mouth.

"But I am so thirsty," he said.

"Drink again in a moment."

He saw Alaric standing in the doorway. "Sing for me, please minstrel. I dreamed you sang for me."

"As you wish, young master," Alaric replied. And as the boy drank more broth and even ate a little bread, Alaric sang of knights and fair maidens and fire-breathing monsters.

Over the next few days, as he continued to drink the elixir, the boy improved dramatically. His fever vanished, his paleness was replaced by healthy color, his eyes brightened, his cheeks lost their sunken look. By the time the flask was empty, he could even stand up, though his legs were weak and shaky after so much time in bed. But his small, soft voice was stronger, and his laugh was clear and unmarred by any coughing. Three days later, he insisted upon going downstairs to the great hall, so that he could dine with his father and uncle; he even walked part of the way.

Seeing him sitting so straight upon his cushioned bench, the servants and the men in bossed leather made much of him, and he answered them like a little lord, graciously, his face glowing with the attention. But his nurse would not let him stay long, for fear of overtiring him, and as soon as the meal was done, his father carried him back upstairs, laughing with

him, laughing loud and long. That night, Alaric sang him to sleep, as had become his habit.

"How can I reward you, minstrel?" Lord Gazian asked for the dozenth time as he and his brother and Alaric sat by lamplight in the great hall.

Alaric just shook his head and strummed his lute. He had already politely refused Gazian's own gold chain as being a gift that would only be stolen from him somewhere along the road. He understood how rare such wealth was near the Lake of Death and he, who could steal all the gold he wished, did not want to carry off any of their poor treasures. "I have everything I want — good food, a soft place to sleep, music, and listeners who like what I offer."

"But you wander the world, never knowing where your next meal will come from, never knowing even whether you will sleep with a roof over your head."

"Minstrels are born wanderers, my lord. We don't mind sleeping in the open or hunting game for our suppers."

"A homeless life. Not one most men would choose."

Alaric shrugged. "In truth, I have a thousand homes, for wherever folk are good hosts, there I feel welcome. As here."

"Do you indeed feel welcome here, Master Alaric?"

"I do."

Lord Gazian leaned forward. "Then stay with us. Make your life here. The boy would like that, I know, and I would as well."

"This is a kind offer, my lord."

"And there would be no need to sing every night, only when you wished it. You would be as a member of my own family, like a second younger brother."

Alaric glanced at Demirchi, who was lounging back in his chair, playing with his gold chain. "That is too high for me," said the minstrel. "You have a brother already."

"Call it what you will," said Gazian. "This is my desire."

Alaric drew another chord from the lute. "You overwhelm me, my lord."

"Will you do it?"

"I must think. This is a great decision. I have a certain sort of life, and giving it up would be hard."

"This is a wealthy land," said Gazian, "and a safe one, as you know."

"Wealthy?" muttered Demirchi. He looked at Alaric from beneath lowered eyelids. "Surely our young minstrel has seen wealthier. He's traveled the world and seen castles full of gold, haven't you, lad?"

"Occasionally," said Alaric.

"Our wealth is our grain and livestock," said Gazian. "That is the only wealth that matters. The rest is mere display."

"And will you still be saying that when we are all sitting on the floor because our chairs are broken?" asked Demirchi.

"You exaggerate, my brother."

Demirchi snorted. "The peasants already sit on stone. And you won't even sell a little of our surplus grain to buy us wood."

Gazian looked at him. "The lord who sells his grain is a fool. I've told you I will not flirt with famine."

"There hasn't been a famine since our great-grandfather's day."

"And you can promise me there never will be, is that it?"

"Brother — "

"Enough. I won't hear you try to win the minstrel to your side with these tired old arguments. If you want wood, go trade your own gold chain for a fine chair at some great town. I won't stop you."

Demirchi made no reply to that, only frowned at his brother and fingered the chain.

Alaric looked from one of them to the other. "I am sorry to be the cause of such a quarrel, my masters," he said softly.

Demirchi straightened in his chair. "It is an old quarrel, minstrel," he said, and then his frown twisted into a sardonic smile. "One I never win. But that does not make me give up. Perhaps when we, too, are sitting on stone benches, my brother will finally think again about our wealth." He rose to his feet. "Now I shall bid you good night, brother, and you, Master Alaric. I hope you *will* stay with us, minstrel, for every time he sees you, my brother will remember that there is a world beyond this lake." He bowed slightly and left by way of the stairway to the upper floors.

Lord Gazian looked at his own gold chain for a moment after his brother had gone. Then he raised his eyes to Alaric's. "Are we too poor for you, minstrel?"

Alaric smiled. "I have sung at great houses and small, to listeners

clothed in velvet and listeners clothed in rags. There was not much difference in their enjoyment. Just in the food they offered. And your food is excellent, my lord."

Gazian nodded. "And our enjoyment is high. It always would be. Think hard on your decision, Alaric."

"I will, my lord. I promise."

"Now...perhaps one last song before we sleep?"

"Of course, my lord."

And he sang of a long dark journey to a distant land where a sip of the water could make one immortal, as long as one never left. The youth who made the journey stayed many centuries and was happy, but he went out at last, homesick for the place of his birth, and crumbled to dust as soon as he passed the land's enchanted border.

When the song was done, Gazian said, "Is that what you think of my offer? That someday you would regret staying?"

Alaric shook his head. "It is only a song, my lord."

"The boy wants you to stay. And he needs you. He is not completely well yet. What if he falls ill again? Only you know where to find the elixir. He has been ill so much of his life!"

Alaric slid his hand along the strings of his lute, eliciting only the faintest murmur of sound. Then he said, "I could draw you a map. But it is a long, hard journey. And no promise that at the end the maker of the elixir would give any to a stranger."

"So much the more do we need you."

"I need time to think, my lord."

Gazian leaned toward him and gripped his arm. "You will be a brother to me. I swear it."

Alaric smiled. "It is not a repellent offer, my lord. But I need a little time."

"Of course," said Gazian, letting go of him. "I look forward to your answer, whenever you are ready with it."

Alaric bowed to him, bade him good-night, and went upstairs.

He lay awake for a while, considering the offer. It was not the best he had ever had, nor the worst. It had certain attractions, not the least the quality of the food. But he had eaten good food elsewhere. And he had met kind people elsewhere. And he had never stayed. He had not decided what to tell Lord Gazian by the time he fell asleep.

He awoke to the sound of someone entering the room and to light, though not the light of morning. It was a small oil lamp, and Master Demirchi held it high. Outside the chamber window, the sky was still black as midnight.

"Minstrel?" said Demirchi.

Alaric sat up on his pallet. "Yes?"

"My lord and brother wishes to see you on the postern balcony."

"Is it Ospir?"

"No. Will you come?"

Alaric pushed his cloak aside and reached for his lute. "Of course."

Demirchi led the way down the stair and out the great iron-banded door. A low half-moon illuminated the lake and the stone balcony. The lake was misty, the balcony was empty.

"He'll be here shortly," said Demirchi. "You were quicker to wake and gather yourself together than we presumed."

"Very well," said Alaric, and he played a chord on the lute.

Demirchi went to the stone railing and looked out over the lake. "You wouldn't think that something so beautiful could be so deadly," he said.

"No," said Alaric. The mist swirled, so heavy in some places that the surface of the water was hidden. Peering at it, Alaric now had no trouble imagining shapes in the wind-stirred whiteness — buildings, trees, even human figures moving upon the water. "My lord Gazian says there are ghosts on the lake. In the mist."

"Oh, yes. I see them often. But they never come near the castle."

Alaric stepped closer to the railing. "Do the people of the village also see them?"

"I don't know," said Demirchi. "I've never asked. Ah, look at that one there. A woman with her arms stretched out to us."

Alaric followed the line of his pointing finger. "Where?"

"Farther to the right."

Alaric squinted into the mist. "I don't quite —"

At that moment, he felt a tremendous blow on the back of his head, an impact so sudden and sharp that it pushed him beyond pain and into a moonless, starless, insensate dark. But he was there, it seemed, for only an instant, wrapped in the thick black velvet of nothing; and then,

abruptly, he was enveloped in water, and his mouth and nose were filled with the thick bitterness of brine. He swallowed the vile stuff, breathed it in, choked, and flailed his arms and legs in panic. His struggles brought him to the surface, coughing and gasping. Through burning eyes he saw Lord Gazian's castle looming above him, the postern balcony jutting out over the deadly water. He fought the terror that told him his skin was stripping away from his bones, running like wax melting from a candle. With horrible clarity, he knew where he was and where he wanted to be. In his own special way, he leaped.

And tumbled into the cold, fresh water of the river beside Kata's tent.

In a moment, he was pulling himself up its grassy bank, stopping half in and half out of the water, vomiting and coughing and drawing great ragged breaths of air. Then he rolled back into the river to rinse himself again. By the time he finally crawled out of the water, Kata was waiting for him, a burning brand held high in one hand.

"What is all this commotion?" she said.

He tried to strip off his clothes, thinking that they might still bear some trace of the deadly water, and when she moved to help him, he thrust her away, fearful of harming her with its touch. "It will kill you," he told her. "Maybe it has killed me already." The wet shirt came off at last.

"What are you talking about? Are you wounded?" She held the torch close and peered at him.

"I fell into the Lake of Death. The water will eat the flesh from your bones in a few heartbeats. They spray it at their enemies." He had his trews off now and was shivering in the northern breeze. He clutched himself with crossed arms.

Kata gripped his shoulder hard, and when he tried to pull away, she slapped his face and gripped him again. "This flesh looks well enough to me."

He looked at his shaking hands, his arms, his chest.

"Not a mark on you," she said. "Now come sit by the fire."

Inside her warm tent, Alaric's shivering subsided. Kata thrust the brand into the fire, stirring it to a bright blaze, and inspected him again, more closely. Again she found no signs of damage.

"There are substances which can dissolve flesh," she said, running her hands firmly over his arms and torso, "but they make it slippery first,

and your flesh is not. Tell me, does this Lake of Death have a scent? Pungent? Sharp? Making the eyes stream?"

Alaric shook his head.

"And what is the taste of it?"

"Salty and bitter."

"Open your mouth." She lit a splint and held it near his face. "Your tongue is normal, and the inside of your mouth. Is your throat painful?"

"No. But it made my eyes burn."

"Any brine would do that. Is your vision harmed?"

"I don't think so. And the burning is less now."

Kata dropped the splint into the fire. "This deadly lake water would seem not so deadly then."

"But it is. It must be. They all said so."

Kata looked at him sharply. "Is this my Alaric speaking?"

He hesitated, remembering Taskol's cautions, Demirchi's desire to sell the water as a weapon. "It has kept their enemies away for generations."

Kata nodded, then she dipped into one of her bags and pulled out a long-handled bronze ladle. "Bring me a sample of this water, Alaric. I would examine it closely."

Alaric took the ladle, but he said, "This will not reach the water, lady, not from any safe place."

"Then we will give it a longer handle." Under the bundles on one side of her tent she found a spare support pole, as long as Alaric was tall. "Will this suffice?"

Outside, they bound the pole to the ladle with strong sinew.

"You must promise me to be very careful, lady," Alaric said, the pole set on his shoulder like a pike, the bowl of the ladle resting in his hand.

"Of course."

Naked, he traveled to the lake shore near the place where the causeway began. The mist was thick there, and the shore deserted, as he expected. He flitted to a spot a dozen paces along the stone road, and lying flat on his stomach, stretching his arm downward to its limit, he was able to scoop up a small amount of water. He climbed to his feet carefully, waited a few moments for the ladle to stop dripping, and returned to the north.

Kata held a ceramic bowl while he poured the contents of the ladle into it. Then they went inside her tent.

"No, there is no odd scent," she said, after sniffing at the liquid. "Nor the oiliness that would mark some of the more powerful flesh-dissolvers." She found a thin strip of leather and dangled one end into the bowl. She moved it around, stirring the water. "A few heartbeats, you say."

"That's what they told me."

She pulled the strip out and peered at it closely. Then she dunked it again, for a longer time, and pulled it out. "I see nothing."

"I don't know that this is a fair test," said Alaric.

"Leather is skin, is it not?"

"Cured skin. Perhaps that makes it proof against the deadliness, I was told the people have ways of carrying it, even of pumping it."

"No doubt," said Kata, and she thrust her finger into the bowl.

"No!" said Alaric.

"My Alaric, this is a brine, nothing more." She stirred it with her finger. "Look." She raised her unharmed finger from the bowl. And then she licked it and nodded. "A strong brine and a bitter one. Saltier by far than the Northern Sea, and with more salts than just the one we put on our food. But a pleasant enough bath, I think, if you hadn't feared it would kill you. That was a clumsy thing, my Alaric, falling into a lake you so feared."

"I didn't fall," he said. "I was pushed. By someone who believed the water would kill me. I know he believed it."

"Ah." She set the bowl down by the fire. "Well, I suppose they must, and their enemies, too. What strange beliefs there are in the south, with no proof behind them!"

He sighed. "Well, the water will prove deadly enough to something. I had my lute when I went in. And I didn't think to bring it north with me. So it floats...somewhere in the lake."

"And it won't survive the wetting."

"No. I shall have to find another."

"You've done that before."

"Yes. Yes." He stared into the fire, but his inner eye saw the Lake of Death instead. He thought back over the time he had been in Lord Gazian's castle. He thought about Gazian himself, and Ospir and Demirchi.

Especially Demirchi. And he wondered if Demirchi had paused on the stairs to listen to his last song, and to the conversation that followed it. Or perhaps he had not needed to hear them. Perhaps his decision had been made while he played with his gold chain. "I must go back," he said at last.

"To a place where they tried to kill you?"

"I must."

"For revenge, my Alaric? That is not like you."

"No. To protect someone."

They dried his clothes over Kata's fire, and a moment after he put them on, he was back in his temporary bedchamber in Lord Gazian's castle. Dawn had not yet come.

He slipped into Ospir's room. The boy was sleeping soundly, and the nurse was dozing in the chair at the foot of the bed. Gently, Alaric touched her shoulder, and when she opened her eyes, he made a sign for her to follow him.

In the corridor, the door closed between themselves and Ospir, he said, "Why were you so eager to fetch the wine the first night we gave the boy the elixir?"

She frowned. "I, Master Alaric? I only wanted to bring it so that the boy could drink."

"Lord Gazian had ordered his brother to fetch it."

"But he was delaying, Master Alaric."

"He would have gone in another moment, you know that. Or my lord would have given you the order. But you didn't wait."

"Master Alaric — "

"With all that talk of poison, were you afraid of what Master Demirchi might fetch?"

Her eyes became wary. "I would never say anything like that!"

"But I think you must know that Master Demirchi did not want the boy to live. Does not want the boy to live."

The woman hesitated. "He was happy to be the heir, everyone knows that."

"But the boy is no longer ill. Demirchi will not be the heir."

"Master Alaric — "

He gripped her shoulder hard. "Tell me the truth, woman. Don't you

think Demirchi knows that you suspect him? Or do you try to ingratiate yourself with him by your silence?"

She shook her head. "I don't know what you mean."

"And you left the two of them together many a time, didn't you, so that Demirchi could put his evil powders in the boy's cup, his bowl, his pastries?"

"The boy loves him, and he loves the boy. What is this talk of evil powders?"

"Or perhaps you put them there yourself."

"I? No!"

"Shall I tell Lord Gazian why his son has been so sick for so many years?"

"You would not accuse me!"

"I would tell the truth. And because I saved the boy's life, he would believe me."

Tears started in the woman's eyes. "Oh, Master Alaric, don't accuse me. What could I do? I am only a servant, and he is my lord's brother. He could throw me into the lake! I never wished the boy ill. I love him dearly."

"But not as much as your own life."

The tears overflowed down her cheeks. "No, not as much." She covered one side of her face with her hand. "You are an outsider. You don't know. It is a terrible death."

"I do know," he said softly. "He killed me that way."

Her mouth dropped open.

"Yes," said Alaric. "I am dead. And I am part of the mist on the lake now. But I know how to enter the castle. Go tell Master Demirchi that I wish to see him on the postern balcony. Now."

She shook her head. "He sleeps. I cannot disturb him."

"Yes, you can," said Alaric and, letting go of her abruptly, he vanished.

The balcony was deserted when, in the next heartbeat, he appeared there. The iron-banded door was closed and barred from the inside — he checked it to be sure, flitting in and out in an instant. He sat down, then, on the hip-high wall, one knee drawn up, his crossed arms resting on it. He waited. Shortly, he heard the sound of the bars being drawn. The door swung inward, revealing Demirchi.

"Come out, Master Demirchi," he said, smiling.

Demirchi stood where he was.

"Now I know without any doubt that there are ghosts in the mist," said Alaric. "They thank you for sending me to them, for they liked my singing and wanted the singer among them forever."

"No," said Demirchi.

"Yes," said Alaric. "The flesh stripped off my bones quite cleanly, and then even my bones dissolved. And my lute, too, poor thing. But I shall seek its ghost shortly, and we will make ghostly music on the lake. You will hear it at night, Demirchi, and remember what you did."

Demirchi gripped the edge of the door. "Go away," he said hoarsely.

"Oh, I will never go away now. You have made certain of that. I will visit you often, mostly at night, but perhaps in the daytime, too. And perhaps I will bring my ghost friends with me. And together, tomorrow or the next day or the next, we will tell Lord Gazian how you killed me, and how you tried to kill his son. I imagine such ghost testimony would be believed, don't you?"

"You can't come inside," said Demirchi. "The ghosts must stay on the lake!"

"But you know I've already been inside. You can't keep me out. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless you and I can make a bargain."

"What sort of bargain?"

Alaric drew his other leg up and sat tailor-fashion on the wall. "You must swear that you will never try to harm the boy again. That's simple, isn't it? Your promise in return for mine not to bother you and not to tell Lord Gazian."

Demirchi took one small step forward, still clinging to the door. "How do I know you will keep your promise?"

"You have only my word. And I will have only yours. Is that not enough? I won't be far, of course. I'll know if you forswear yourself. And don't think you can evade me by persuading someone else to do the deed. I'll know where the responsibility lies. Ghosts always know things like that. You would be amazed at what the ghosts of this lake know."

Demirchi took another step forward. "You don't look like a ghost."

Alaric shrugged. "I suppose that's because I'm new. Perhaps later I'll fade into the mist. Or perhaps the other ghosts will learn from me how to become...more substantial."

Abruptly, Demirchi leaped, arms outstretched. But Alaric was too quick this time, and vanished, reappearing at the far end of the balcony.

Demirchi's thighs struck the stone railing, and his momentum, unchecked by his intended target, carried him over the edge. He screamed once before he splashed into the water. But after the splash not a sound came from him, not a cough or a gasp or the slightest audible hint of limbs flailing in water.

Alaric leaned over the railing and saw him by moonlight, floating half submerged, face upward, motionless. Even if he had been struggling, there was no way he could climb back to the overhanging balcony, and the shore was a long swim away, especially for someone who had feared the water so much that he surely had never learned to swim. Resigning himself to being wet again, Alaric used his witch's power to reach Demirchi. Treading water, he gripped the man's arms, and in another moment, they were both back on the balcony.

Demirchi sagged limply in Alaric's grasp, and Alaric eased him to the stone floor. "Wake up, Master Demirchi!" he said sharply, kneeling over him and slapping his face. But Demirchi did not wake, and at last Alaric put a hand on the great vein of his neck and then bent to press an ear against his chest. He found no heartbeat.

"Is he dead?" came a small, soft voice from nearby.

Alaric looked up and saw Ospir in the doorway, clutching the curved handle of the great iron and oaken door with both hands. "How long have you been standing there?"

Ospir edged forward slightly. "I heard what you said to my nurse. I listened at the bottom of the door, where it doesn't quite meet the floor. And then I followed him and stood at the next landing." He peered down at Demirchi. "He is dead, isn't he? He was in the water. But he looks all right. I've heard the water makes you look horrible."

"Yes, he's dead. But the water didn't kill him, Ospir. His fear of it did. Would you like to know a secret?"

The boy nodded.

"The water is harmless. It tastes bad, but touching it won't hurt you."

"That isn't what Father says."

"No. It isn't." Alaric climbed slowly to his feet. Water dripped down his arms, his back, his legs, joining the puddle in which Demirchi lay. The boy clung to the door, two paces from that puddle, and did not try to move closer. Alaric wanted to reach out to him, to caress that small dark head, to give him comfort at the sight of death. But he did not. "Well, you must believe your father," he said finally. "He is a good man. Not like your uncle."

The boy looked up at him. "You said he tried to kill me."

"Yes. He made you very sick. But he won't be able to do that anymore, and you'll be well from now on."

"He did bring me things. Sweets. Were they bad for me?"

"His were. But you'll have others now, and they won't hurt you."

The boy heaved a great sigh. "I did like him. I did. Why did he want to kill me?"

"Because he wanted to be lord of this land after your father. And that is your right, as long as you are alive."

"I liked him very much." For a moment, Ospir's voice was as tiny as at the depth of his illness. "Was that wrong, Master Alaric?"

"No, Ospir, it's not wrong to like people."

"I like you."

"And I, you."

Ospir stretched one hand out toward Alaric, then pulled it back without touching him. "You're really a ghost, aren't you?"

"What do you think?"

"You appeared and disappeared. Only a ghost can do that. Or one of the magic people from your songs."

Alaric looked down at Demirchi's body for a moment, and then he nodded. "Yes, I am a ghost. And now I must leave the castle, because dawn will come soon."

"Oh, don't go!"

"I must. But if you look out on the lake at night, and you see the mist swirling above the water, you'll be seeing me. Never doubt that, Ospir. You'll always be seeing me. And I will never let any of the other ghosts harm you. Not even his." He smiled at the boy one last time. "Farewell, future lord of the Lake of Death."

"Oh, won't you sing just one more song?"

Alaric shook his head. "Ask your nurse to sing."

"She's crying."

"Then tell her for me that she should sing instead." And he vanished.

But he did not go far, just to the shore of the lake, just beyond the wavering mist. From there, the castle was ghostly, wreathed in wispy whiteness, the postern balcony invisible. Walking at the verge, beside the crust of salts, he began to circle the lake. He had not gotten more than a quarter of the way around when he saw ghosts in the mist. Not vague, distant figures that might as easily have been imaginary as real, but solid bodies of flesh and bone, dressed in thin white wool, moving across the surface of the water not a score of paces from the shore. There were four of them, and all were shorter than he.

"I see you," he said. "You might as well come here."

After some hesitation, one of the bodies began to move toward him, and one by one the others followed. Their feet seemed to slide over the water's surface, and when they were closer, he realized that they walked on that surface on wide wooden boards that were strapped to their feet like huge sandals, like the webbed frameworks that the people of the north used for walking on top of snow. When they grounded at the verge, he recognized Yosat, Taskol's son, and three of the other village boys who had listened to him sing beside the headman's home.

"So you are the ghosts of the lake," he said, watching them unfasten the boards from their feet. "Do your parents know what games you play at night?"

"Our fathers gave us these foot-rafts," said Yosat.

"Aren't you afraid of the water? The deadly water."

The boys looked at one another and shuffled uneasily.

"So you all know," said Alaric. "It's only the people of the island who don't know. And outsiders."

"You won't tell anyone, will you?" said Yosat, his voice anxious.

"I? Oh, I won't be able to tell anyone. I'm a ghost, too, killed this very night by the terrible water. You'll hear about me tomorrow, I'd guess. And if, someday, some minstrel happens to sing of this place, why, folk will marvel at water that strips the flesh from a man's bones and then dissolves those bones to nothing. It's a very good tale. I wouldn't change it for

anything." He reached out to grip the boy's shoulder. "I would ask you to tell your father farewell for me, but I think perhaps you would do better not to let him know we saw each other."

Yosat nodded. "Thank you, minstrel."

"But there is one thing I will ask — a favor from you in return for that favor from me."

"Anything." And the others murmured their agreement.

"There's a boy on that island. He was sick for a long time, but he's well now. Visit him. Play with him. He needs friends." He smiled. "Perhaps someday you might even show him how to play ghost." Then he turned and, with a wave of his hand, walked into the night.

When he could no longer see them, looking back over his shoulder — when their pale, moonlit shapes had been swallowed up by darkness and distance — he vanished in search of daylight, a fire to dry his clothes by, and a new lute. ☞

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BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

Silk, by Caitlín R. Kiernan, Roc Books, 1998, \$6.50

ONE OF THE great joys of reviewing is the delight one experiences when finding a new author, or a special book, that you might not otherwise have come across if it hadn't happened to land in your P.O. box as part of the regular deluge of new releases.

I think I've mentioned this before: I don't read everything that arrives, and I don't review everything I read, but I do give almost everything the same test. I open the book to the first page and read until I get bored. Sometimes that only takes a paragraph or two, sometimes a few pages or even chapters. And more rarely still (because, truthfully, it is a deluge of books, all vying for attention, and since taste is so subjective, and the choices so varied), you find the treasure, the book that rekindles your

faith in the whole process, the author's voice that has its own flavor, and its own story to tell.

Now according to the brief author's bio accompanying *Silk*, Caitlín Kiernan isn't exactly a neophyte. She's contributed to a number of high-profile anthologies and also scripts comic books for Vertigo/DC, but this is her first novel, and she's new to me. But from the first page of *Silk*, I knew she has what it takes to excite me as a reader.

Now, first a caveat. This book isn't necessarily going to appeal to everyone. Kiernan has an idiosyncratic way with prose, using run-on and incomplete sentences, and sometimes both at once. It makes for an immediate voice, if not a traditional one. Her characters also won't appeal to all readers. They live in the harsh world of the streets, where there's little hope, abundant drug use and profanity, and not a whole lot of respect for the status quo as regulated by society at large.

On the plus side, however, they come across as real individuals, they care for each other, and they're profoundly loyal.

The novel is set in Birmingham, Alabama, where Kiernan explores the lives of a group of misfit twenty-year-olds living on the edge of normal society. Some are musicians, one's a junkie, they're all battered survivors of their pasts — sometimes barely so. The thread that connects them is a woman named Spyder, an enigma who suffers from severe mental disorders, but who also has a pipeline to things that lie beyond our everyday perception. You don't want to cross her because she has supernatural protectors. Unfortunately, these protectors can't always differentiate between those who really mean her harm, and those who only seem to do so.

If your inclination runs to contemporary fantasy, especially that with a darker, somewhat nasty edge, you might want to try this book. For a touchstone, think of *Poppy Z. Brite* with slightly more accessible prose and characters who aren't quite so outré as those who come from the pen of the real queen of New Orleans dark fantasy (forget Rice's claim to the crown).

Personally, I just loved this

book and can't wait to see what she writes next.

The Double: An Investigation, by Don Webb, St. Martin's Press, 1998, \$22.95

How can the opening premise not intrigue you? John Reynman, an Austin-based designer of computer games, wakes up to find his own corpse on the living room floor. It's a killer of an opening, no pun intended, and the mystery only deepens in subsequent chapters. Unfortunately, to discuss the plot any more closely will steal away too many pleasures and surprises for those of you who mean to give the book a try. But we can talk about some generalities.

The book's being marketed as a mystery — and rightfully so since it plays by the rules of this world we all know — but it's written with the sensibility of a fantasy, particularly one along the lines of Tim Powers, though we could also use a few Texan writers as touchstones. (What is it with these guys? Too many nights out under those big Texas skies? So many of them have such wonderfully skewed visions of the world.) But let's stick with Powers for the moment.

Like Powers, Webb doesn't take

the easy way to further his plot. The reasons for why things are the way they are keep getting more and more convoluted the deeper we get into the book, folding back on themselves and generally infusing the reader with a paranoia that everything really is connected, there really are huge, complicated conspiracies out there, and what happened (and happens) to Reynman could happen to any of us. The difference is, Webb does it in shorthand, conveying a similar intensity, with much less wordage, but no less effectively.

Also, unlike Powers, Webb's characters have active libidos and a kind of nineteen-sixties approach to the whole idea of relationships.

A fascinating book and, like Kiernan's, not for everyone, though for different reasons.

Dangerous Angels, by Francesca Lia Block, HarperCollins, 1998, \$12.

I love this woman's books, as longtime readers of this column have probably gathered already. And though nothing she's written to date can beat "Blue" from her collection

Girl Goddess #9 (a story which adds a fascinating twist to the idea of an imaginary friend and is one of my three favorite stories of all time), the Weetzie Bat books come awfully close. Set in her own wonderfully idiosyncratic Los Angeles which she calls Shangri-L.A., these short novels deal with the issues of coming of age, coming out, divorce, and other serious concerns in a manner that is engaging and whimsical, without ever detracting from the seriousness of the issues.

I've discussed some of the books reprinted in this collection at greater length in earlier columns, so here I'll be brief and simply say that singly or together, they come highly recommended.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

Halfway Human, by Carolyn Ives Gilman, Avon Eos, February 1998, \$5.99

Commitment Hour, by James Alan Gardner, Avon Eos, March 1998, \$5.99

IF WE DEFINE our genre as Science Fiction and Fantasy, then I began reading in genre quite early in my life. If we define the genre as sf alone, I actually wasn't exposed to much of it until I was about fifteen years old (give or take a year or two), and the first three books I can remember having any impact on me at all were: *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Female Man*, and *Dune*. The first of these three made me really think about my own reaction to the concept of gender; I can still remember clearly when one of the hermaphroditic aliens goes into their version of heat. Everything about that particular character was

so oily, so overpoweringly manipulative and domineering, that I was shocked when it cycled into the female sex. The shock itself shocked me, and I went away and chewed on what it meant about my own preconceptions. The second of the three books was important because it gave voice to anger, and it also forced me to question a lot of things I had otherwise just accepted — gender roles, things that I had always lived with. So the first two books that strongly affected me, in this entire literature of ideas, were books about gender issues. *Dune*, by contrast, was straight narrative to me at the time, something that didn't demand thought in quite the same reflective way, which is probably good because I couldn't put it down.

Why is this relevant?

In *Halfway Human*, Gilman has combined that sense of narrative drive with the quality of the earlier Le Guin, to come up with a novel that deserves attention and

time, but that can still be read without either — no mean feat, that.

To examine gender issues clearly in sf is probably easier than in most other genres: first, you create a world. Gilman's is Gammadis, a planet closed to human contact and exploration because of a disastrous first contact expedition over half a century past. The natural order of the world has split in an unusual fashion: children are born with putative sexual organs. They are raised in crèches, they never know their parents, and when they reach the Gammadian equivalent of puberty, they will either develop a functioning set of female sexual organs, a functioning set of male sexual organs — or the putative sexual organs will die, leaving them entirely sexless in a society where the physical possession of functioning sexual organs of either gender define your status as, quite literally, a human being.

Here, Gilman has been exceptionally clever — but in a bone-deep way. Without a world in which the nuclear family — with all its associated ties — had completely broken down, the class of neuters, or "pubers" as they're sometimes called, would have a much harder time just existing. Given the rela-

tive scientific knowledge possessed by the Gammadians, it would only be a matter of time before concerned parents assaulted the system — to change it, to protect their children and their children's future in it, regardless of their eventual sexual identity. There *are* no parents; the neuters exist as a breed and a species apart, a guilty secret, a remnant of a past that people would like to forget.

Gilman contrasts this society with Capella Two, a future, Earth-like planet where sexual identity is very much contemporary North American, as is the basic family unit (replete with mothers-in-law and the concerns of working parents who are struggling to make ends meet).

The connections between Capella Two and Gammadis are Tedla Galele, a Gammadian neuter, and Valerie Endrada, a would-be xenologist whose choice of career has limited her family's financial mobility to the point where they can't actually afford to send their bright young daughter, Deedee, to school. Husband Max and mother-in-law Joan round out the picture; it is Joan who calls Valerie Endrada into a meeting with Tedla Galele — a meeting that will, in the end, change both of their lives. Because

Tedla, alien and completely isolated, has tried to take its own life.

This alien is the find of Val's life, her ticket to prestige, to authority, to money in a world where information is the only real currency. But Tedla isn't just walking information, it is *also* a human being embroiled in the politics of the two biggest info-giants on Capella Two, and we see quickly that Tedla's story is of great interest — especially its suppression. Valerie's struggle between giving in to the authorities, which will finally justify years of financial penury, and protecting Tedla is a very realistic one, and it rounds out Val's character, giving her a dimension that's often missing in genre fiction.

Tedla itself begins to speak to Val; its story, haunting and dark, is almost Victorian in structure and gloom; it is a tale of multiple wrongs, of victimization piled upon victimization — first in the training grounds that will eventually see Tedla "fit" for human company, and later in that human company. Abused several times over, sexually exploited, loved, deserted, and given to an alien for safe-keeping, the young protagonist eventually ends up in the streets of a Capellan city, a gun in hand. (Terrible aim, though.)

What's interesting, again, is Gilman's choice. The narrator is *not* a reliable narrator, and it's only at the end that we see this clearly, although the truth is absolutely shoved under our noses a number of times before then. Tedla is a product, psychologically, of its culture — that of victim with no rights and no real protection. Survival has become the chief rule by which it lives and schemes, and even in speaking to Val, this tenet is part of its personality.

Rescued by an alien, Tedla goes to school at one of the most prestigious learning institutes in the galaxy ... and then its world turns over with a discovery about its protector and savior that it cannot face until it's too late.

I thought, reading the book through, that Gilman's Tedla-as-neuter was a terrific choice, because it underlines the age-old and often-ignored truth about the entire gender struggle: It's not a question of the physical sex of the people involved, but rather a question of their relative power and social standing. By removing genitalia from Tedla, by making Tedla, essentially, the eternal child, Gilman underlines the fact that gross sexual, physical, and social abuses systematically occur when there is

an imbalance of power. The women of Gammadis are no less abusive — sexually or physically — than the men of Tedla's acquaintance. It's not about sex. Power. Think power.

Which is exactly what I thought, until a friend of mine, having read and really enjoyed the book, asked me a simple question: "Did you ever think of Tedla as anything other than female?"

I answered honestly, "No," because I assumed that my reaction to Tedla was personal, a reaction of identification with a victim, with the Victorian structure of the novel, with my own sense of helplessness as a child (which, given that I'm a woman, would have to be female, etc., etc.). I made excuses for it. Then I went home to think about it, just as I'd done with the Le Guin all those years ago.

I came away more impressed with the book than I had been, because of course, having made the point that power, not actual gender, is at issue, Gilman has also, very subtly, made the point that in *this* culture and *this* world, analogous systematic abuses *do* occur. And, of course, the victims are the powerless: Women. Children. There's a speech, angry, defiant, and terrified, that Tedla makes at the novel's end that is so *true* and so

contemporary it makes one stop to wonder, to pause, to reflect.

By contrast, there's *Commitment Hour* by James Alan Gardner. It is also a book that confronts gender issues. But where Gilman muddies the waters by the complexity of a psychology that feels profoundly real, Gardner goes to the philosophical heart of the matter when he creates the universe in which he sets his story.

In Tober Cove, a small town on an Earth that has been visited by aliens who took most of humanity to the stars, and left behind those who were somewhat more xenophobic or superstitious, a very unusual culture resides. Children are born normally, and they're normal (usually) boys and girls. But when they turn one, they — and the children who are older than they are — are taken in an airborne craft to see Master Crow, who turns them into a child of the opposite sex, memories intact, and sends them back to their parents for a year. Every year until they reach twenty, the children make this trek, switching back and forth between the male and female bodies. At their twentieth year, they are taken in airborne crafts — but instead of visiting Master Crow, they visit Mistress

Gull, and are offered a final choice: they can choose to be "male, female or both." Thus the title of the book, and the dilemma of the protagonist, Fullin.

Gardner makes a good case for a unified personality; he strongly implies that in earlier days in Tober Cove, there *were* hermaphrodites (called neuts throughout the book, and seen as abominations and perverts). Unfortunately, he damages his case because his narrator's entire personality seems to switch between "male" and "female" modes that are quite, quite rigid, even stereotypical. This is explained as the effects of the Patriarch, a man who was locked into the male sex, and was never able to change over. He disliked women, loathed neuts, and took over the cove, layering its culture with a "masculine" personality and attitude toward women that made the stereotypes an accepted version of life, which every adult is expected to choose *between*. The third option, "both," is looked on as such a terrible perversion that exile is the only option — that or death.

The book starts with the Commitment Eve vigil, in which a young man is on the verge of choosing his permanent sex, and worrying about the overly attached young woman

with whom he's been living. His vigil is interrupted by the visit of two things that are despised throughout Tober Cove: A neut and a scientist.

His Commitment Eve goes downhill from there, especially as he's a young man who doesn't like to muddy the waters.

Preoccupation with sex (there's a lot of it, but the young protagonist feels like a very convincing adolescent male, so it doesn't seem forced) never quite leaves, but into the mix comes the horrible news that the neut, Steck, was his mother before she made her commitment. She and Fullin's adoptive father were close, and Zephram felt obligated to raise Fullin after his mother was driven out of the village.

It gets worse; there's another hidden neut in the village, also associated with Fullin's adopted father. A murder, a bunch of unwanted questions, and much agonizing later, Commitment Hour approaches — but even that goes awry when Steck and the scientist choose to accompany the natives to Bird's Nest to meet Mother Gull.

Fullin, as you've probably guessed, is *not* a happy camper.

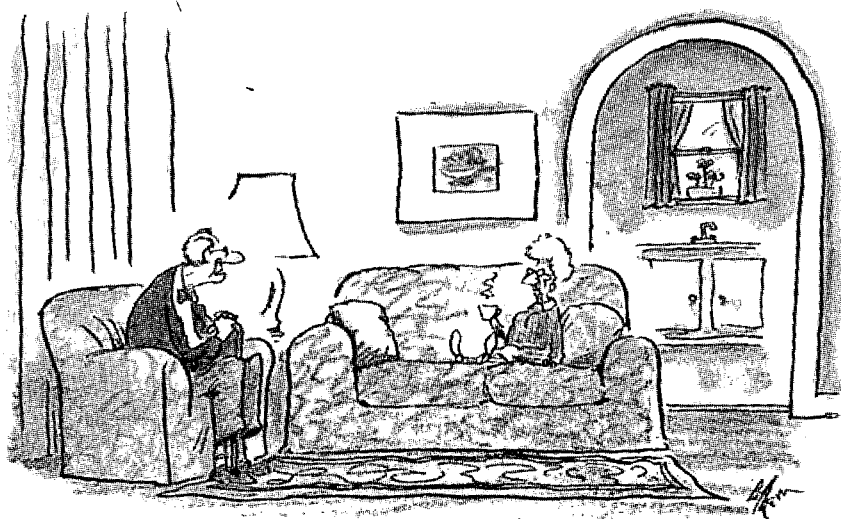
The final confrontation, and the final truths, of the novel are revealed at Bird's Nest.

What's slightly frustrating is this: having made the argument — by positing the irrationality of separating out personalities into "male" and "female" as the Tober Cove natives have done — Gardner's authorial choices seem to support the split subtly: the only two neuts in the book were originally women when they made their Commitment, both were seriously lonely or disturbed in their own ways, and they both chose to become neuter for reasons that had nothing to do with the elusive balance of gender that the book seems to be saying we should seek.

As if the choice itself is threatening, the protagonist, in the end, *never* chooses; the choice is made by the author.

Having said all of this, I think that had I read this novel when I read the earlier books named, it would have forced me to think about gender issues in ways I hadn't thought about them before — and it would have also forced me to question my own attachment to physical form.

The Gilman is an older person's novel, the Gardner, a younger person's novel. ♪



"I had hoped that as we aged we'd shrink at the same rate."



EDITOR'S RECOMMENDATIONS



AFTER MY editorial last month, I feel as though I should recommend lots of science fiction, but most of the books I want to point out this month are best classified as Gothic fiction. *The Boss in the Wall* by Avram Davidson and Grania Davis (Tachyon Publications) certainly falls under that heading, admirably. This "Treatise on the House Devil" is a short novel about a house haunted by a wonderfully vivid and creepy bogeyman, the sort of monster that bypasses the rational brain and goes straight to the primal terror center.

"Gothic" also applies to Jack Cady's short fiction, six major instances of which are assembled in *The Night We Buried Road Dog* (DreamHaven). *F&SF* readers will recognize the title story and "Kilroy Was Here;" the other, shorter stories here are all well worth reading.

Most Gothic of all is a real oddity: *Malpertuis* by Jean Ray (@las Press, London). Ray (1887-1964) was a Belgian writer considered by some

to be Europe's answer to H. P. Lovecraft. His only previous book published in the U.S. was a 1965 paperback story collection entitled *Ghouls in My Grave*. Iain White's introduction to this volume suggests that *Malpertuis* was Ray's finest achievement. I don't know that I'd rank it with Lovecraft's finest works, but it's certainly interesting: an elliptical tale of bizzarrities centered on an old stone house and a legacy wrapped within an ancient enigma. This book still hasn't quite released its hold on me.

Lastly, I'd like to recommend two books for writers. Nancy Kress's *Dynamic Characters* (Writer's Digest Books) is a helpful and wide-ranging guide to the craft of characterization from someone who practices what she preaches. *Steering the Craft* by Ursula K. Le Guin (Eighth Mountain Press) is a set of exercises and discussions that grew out of a 1996 workshop. This book's purely about writing craft — tenses, syntax, narrative strategies — and it's immensely useful, from my point of view. ♣

This fantasy was inspired by a painting (bearing this same title) of a young woman gazing at her self—off-center—in a mirror. The painter, Berthe Morisot, was one of the Impressionists, and she was indeed married to the brother of the painter Manet. From these starting points, Mark Tiedemann has leapt into the fantastic and the results are an interesting meditation on the nature of seeing, and on the nature of the soul.

Psyché

By Mark W. Tiedemann

THE SCAR APPEALED TO HER. That and the clear, almost glasslike eyes. He seemed to be looking at her through a broken window. Berthe blinked and looked away. He would be a fascinating subject for a painting.

"Not myself," he said, his Dutch accent slowing his words.

"I understand that, Monsieur Van Helsing," Berthe said. "I don't do — I have never done — a death mask. It's not something my technique is well suited to —"

"Yes, yes, I realize that. This new style...I confess I do not care for it myself, but it has certain advantages which I believe will work to my purposes."

Berthe smiled tolerantly and looked out her window. Paris seemed drugged under the searing August sun and the late hour's light layered the city with an amber stickiness that blurred detail and nagged at her to go to her easel and palette.

"Wouldn't a sculptor be better...?"

"No. The subject would not, I think, be served by a too precise rendering." He drew a deep breath and seemed to look inward. His forehead creased thoughtfully. "There was a fluidity to him in... before."

Berthe flexed her fingers and winced at the slight pain. She rubbed her right hand gently.

"Rheumatism?"

She looked up, startled.

"I am a doctor," he explained, the ghost of a smile twisting the scar. "Is it bad?"

Berthe shrugged. "Painting is sometimes difficult, but usually only in the morning or during winter. It is nothing."

"I could prescribe — "

"No. No, thank you." She sighed again. "Your offer intrigues me, I admit, but not for the reasons you may think."

"I am prepared to offer a good commission — "

"Of course, I had no doubt, but — in truth, monsieur, I would do this for the promise that I am allowed to paint you."

He laughed, a dry exhalation that, for a moment, she thought would degenerate into a ragged cough. For the first time during the interview she saw an unguarded emotion — surprise, perhaps even disbelief — animate his face.

"You are not serious."

"I am, I assure you." She switched hands and rubbed her left. "One finds that one has painted everything after a time. Even if one has not, it seems so. Ennui is a disease of the inspired."

"Is it?"

"You have never been inspired, monsieur?"

"No. Only obsessed. One does not suffer ennui when one is obsessed." He waved his left hand vaguely around his face. "What is it you see?"

"I don't know. But I am inspired."

"Mmm. I am flattered."

"I haven't painted much in this year. My husband passed away in April — "

"I am sorry."

" — and many of my friends, as well, have died in the last few years. I feel...short of time."

"I understand that fully. I am myself not young."

She nodded. "We both are of an age when it is best to be occupied so that we do not dwell on such things overly much."

"There is, unfortunately, nothing left for me to dwell on. Only details. Small things that I feel are necessary to complete what is past."

"Like this death mask?"

"Like the death mask, yes. The subject occupied my attentions for many years."

"Well. You have my terms. I wish to paint you."

"Please, I will pay you as well — "

"I do not ask — "

He pulled his wallet from within his heavy black coat and thumbed out a sheaf of notes. British pounds, she observed. Sound currency. Everything about this man seemed solid in the extreme. He counted briefly, then laid the notes on the table beside him and looked up.

"I shall be honored to have you paint me, Mme. Morisot. However, if you decide not to afterward, I shall fully understand."

PREPARING THE CANVAS, mixing the temperas, cleaning the brushes — all these details comprised for Berthe the closest thing she had ever found to religious ritual. Even her wedding had been a thing to tolerate, a nuisance. She smiled, remembering what she told her brother afterward. "I went through this ceremony without the least pomp, in a plain dress and hat, like the old woman that I am and with no guests." Old woman. She was amused by that now. She had been thirty-three at the time she had married Eugene and thought she knew what age meant. Since Eugene's death she *did* know. It meant loneliness.

At least, she thought, I am not a burden to anyone. Money had never been difficult, her family had seen to that. Attention — specifically its absence — had always been a problem. People did not take the new art very seriously, even less so when done by a woman, but after Manet's death a sudden interest had caused a rise in everyone's fortunes. Her paintings sold at auction now and Degas, at least, had made sure she received her

due. Her reputation, her position, always problematic in polite society, now carried weight.

A heavy pounding at her door broke the reverie. She wiped her hands and went to answer it. A wagon stood in the narrow lane and two workmen waited at its gate while a third stood at her door.

"Yes?"

"Uh, we have a delivery for Mme. Morisot," he said, doffing his soiled cap.

"That is I."

He thrust a notebook and pencil toward her. "The manifest, please."

She took the pencil and signed. He bowed awkwardly and gestured to the other two. They lowered the gate and pulled a crate from the wagon bed.

The crate was roughly three feet on a side. Berthe led them to her studio and indicated a place on the floor. The workmen glanced nervously at the canvases standing about, mostly half-finished works, muttered good-days to her, and hurried out. When she reached the door the wagon was already pulling away. Berthe watched it until it rounded a corner.

She shrugged and returned to the studio.

Berthe picked up her prybar and walked around the crate, studying it. She had not expected this. She chose a board and jammed the iron bar in. The nails came out easily, for which she was thankful. She lifted off the top. A vague, stale odor escaped and she wrinkled her nose. An envelope lay atop the straw stuffing.

"Mme. Morisot, Please forgive the impersonal nature of this procedure. I do not wish to distract you from any reactions which may prove important. Forgive me the macabre circumstance. Within is the subject. V.H."

She pulled out straw until she came to a canvas wrap. She found the loose ends and pulled. The object weighed less than five pounds. The fabric felt quite cold and she carried it quickly to a table near her easel. She went back to the crate and pulled the rest of the straw out. Finding nothing more hidden within, she looked at the canvas-wrapped object suspiciously.

She ignored the ill-ease which increased as she unwrapped the canvas. The last fold revealed a head.

Berthe stepped back. No eyes — the sockets were empty — and no hair. The cheeks were sunken on either side of a straight, lipless mouth. Its ivory whiteness lent it an abstract quality, like a cameo or a dream; it was marbled with fine bluish tracteries. The straight nose ended in a slight hook, giving the whole an aristocratic aspect contrary to every other detail, which seemed ascetic, almost monkish. It stood on a short stump of neck.

When she looked up the shadows had changed. Day had moved on. Berthe turned, mildly puzzled, her legs sore. She went to the kitchen and poured water. She drank thirstily, filled her cup again, then looked for something to eat. There was a plate of beef and cheese in her ice box. Seeing it, she realized that she was famished.

She had not eaten so much at one time since Eugene had died. Her daughter, Julie, would be pleased. Too bad she was away, in England. Berthe sat back from the kitchen table and stared at the ruin of the meal, amazed at herself.

Berthe returned to her studio. The light slanted in through the wide windows, shadowing the head so that it appeared aglow, a thin nimbus encircling the bald skull. Her temperas were partially dried. Irritated, she began to mix new. It was sunset before she finished and the light had taken on a filmy, indistinct quality, selectively illuminating partial details throughout the studio. She sighed and covered the head for the night.

She poured a glass of wine and went to her bedroom. She sat in the wingbacked chair beside her bed and sipped while staring out at the night sky. Berthe slept little anymore, less so with each passing year. Night had become more a companion than a release. She glanced at the unfinished letter to her daughter on her nightstand. Her fingers ached. It could wait for tomorrow.

When she slept she dreamed of painting. It had been a bold move to ask the doctor to pose — she had done few men outside her family — but she did not feel she had to worry about scandal at her age. She did wonder, though, why now; after all this time, she found herself drawn to do a portrait of a stranger.

Her body complained after sleeping the night in the chair. Berthe made tea, ate a little bread, and went to the studio. She uncovered the head

and went to her easel. She threw away the dried paints and started over. Her wrists pulled and her fingers moved stiffly, but she willed her way through the preparations. She did not look at the head until she was ready to work.

The morning light was soft and gave her all the details unaccented by harsh shadows. She selected a piece of chalk and began sketching the outlines with quick semicircular strokes. She found herself referring to the head itself less and less as the shape developed. It became easier simply to concentrate on memory than to try to copy the features directly. Each time she looked at it, something was different, a line had been misplaced, a proportion had shifted. Once, in her youth, she had suffered a severe eye problem which, for a time, terrified her that it might be permanent. She rubbed her eyes now, the old fear tingling in her chest, along the back of her scalp.

Berthe tossed the chalk aside and stood. Her back twinged. She limped around the studio. It was well after noon and she found herself ravenously hungry again. After she ate, she looked at her sketch.

The lines were a muddle, like a bad map, chalk marks hacked and scrawled across each other around the vague outline of a head. Only the shape of the eye sockets was clear.

The light now slanting through the windows came directly in, harsh and sharp. The front of the head was in shadow. The eyes — empty sockets, she reminded herself — did not look so blind now.

Berthe mounted another blank canvas and selected another piece of chalk.

Berthe dropped the pen and rubbed her fingers. The letter, half done, looked illegible.

" — I cannot complete the commission. For some reason beyond my comprehension I am unable to see the subject through my medium. I regret that I must — "

I regret that I must...what?

"I regret, Eugene, that I must tell you I do not love you." She looked around, startled. But it was her own voice, within her own head, nothing more. Ancient memories. She had not thought of those days since before Eugene had died.

The hill was cold that day and they huddled close to keep warm. Neither had thought to bring a wrap, only canvases and paints and a basket with wine and bread. Eugene brought that, he always did, a sharp reminder of his romanticism. And again he brought up the subject of marriage, a sharp reminder of his hopelessness.

"How could I have said no?" Berthe asked. "He was so earnest..."

But there had always been his brother, Edouard, taller, more urbane, by far the talented one. Berthe wanted to believe that she had not married Eugene because she could not have Edouard. She saw Eugene as a victim. Everyone around him, those he most wanted to be like, trapped him into an unachievable ambition. Berthe always wished to emancipate him, but found no way to free someone from a self that disappointed. In time she saw that such freedom would only dissolve him.

"I am not young," she had said.

"Nor am I. But we are friends. And..."

And, of course. Always and. The hillside had been cold, but Eugene, reliable, mediocre Eugene, had brought wine and an offer of solace.

"Then perhaps yes."

Berthe wiped at her cheeks as if expecting to find tears. Her skin was dry. She looked at the letter and slowly crumpled it.

SHE PROPPED THE MIRROR where she could see it from her easel. "If art is a reflection of life," she mused while she worked, "then perhaps life is but a reflection of death. So I will paint a reflection of death."

It made as little sense out loud as it did quietly conceived, but Berthe did not pause. She moved the table bearing the head against the edge of the table with the mirror, then turned the head to face into the mirror.

"Now I just wait for the light," she sighed, satisfied.

She sat down before her canvas. No sketch this time, she had decided. Her paints were ready, brushes stacked. Berthe adjusted herself for comfort and looked into the mirror.

She saw only her studio.

"Damn," she whispered, and got up. She adjusted the mirror and went back to her seat. The mirror reflected the edge of her easel. She leaned to the right and saw herself appear.

She stared at the head, then looked back into the mirror.

The light caught her forehead, the crests of her cheeks, the tip of her nose. Her hair, shadowed, seemed its original rich chestnut brown and for a moment Berthe felt as if she were gazing at a portrait of herself much younger. She rubbed her eyes and went around to shift the mirror again.

As she turned and looked down at the head, a cloud passed through the light, softening the harsh angles of the dead face. She could not imagine that this had ever been a handsome man. Compelling, certainly.

She sat down before her easel and looked into the mirror.

Empty.

She blew a harsh breath and glared at the head. "Damn you," she hissed, reached out, and, fingers pressed down on the top of its skull, turned it to face her. She jerked her fingers away and rubbed them. The head felt cold. Berthe chided herself. "The imagination is a dangerous pet," she said, flexed her fingers, and lifted a brush.

She painted methodically, stroke by stroke, shaping the head with absences. The shadows first, then the dark suggestions embedded in the shadows. Berthe hardly looked at the head, again finding it easier to work from snatches and memory than to try to peer closely at the object.

She completed the canvas as the last light of dusk faded. Her eyes burned and her back felt encased in stone. When she stood a hundred small pains crackled from her ankles up to her neck. She dropped the brush into the clay cup with the others.

The image was too dark now to appraise. She pressed her fingers into her kidneys, flexed gently. Her ears filled with a rush of blood. Let it wait till morning. She walked carefully to the kitchen.

Halfway through her dinner she realized that she had had no breakfast and no lunch. She ached from sitting rigidly before her easel all day.

She poured herself wine and went back to the studio. She stood in the doorway. On the opposite side, now shrouded in darkness, was a closet. Within she had stored all of Eugene's canvases, his sketchbooks, his easels. There were a few paintings they had even done together. Berthe had never allowed anyone to see them. She had always yearned for uniqueness, the recognition that she was her own self and not the shadow of another. The collaborations had been made in the same spirit as lovemaking —

privately, intimate revelations — and, Berthe felt, their meaning would diminish from exhibition.

"Or are you just ashamed of him?"

Berthe frowned at the voice. Her own, true, but when had she started speaking out loud to herself? She looked out over the rest of the night-hidden studio.

The mirror glowed. Beyond, the wide windows let in a pale blue light that delicately dusted corners and edges and flat surfaces, jumbling the shapes into an alien landscape. The light from the mirror, though, seemed bluer, a bit brighter, as if giving back more than it received. An illusion, Berthe thought, and smiled at the twinge of inspiration. She stepped into the studio and picked her way to the easel.

She set down the wine and removed the finished canvas, setting it off to the left. The blue light lifted the pattern of paint from its surface in meaningless swirls. Berthe began humming quietly to herself as she mounted a blank board to the easel. She took a drink, settled herself, and lifted a brush. She felt giddy, as a child embarking on some forbidden adventure.

When she gazed at the mirror it did not surprise her to see a face gaze back at her, clear and still, waiting with an expression of amused tolerance.

"I am ready," she said to the image. "Be patient. These things take time."

The paints had begun to dry, but Berthe managed. The dim rectangle seemed unreal, as if it were no surface at all but a window, and the colors, whatever they were, did not flow onto it so much as into it to hang suspended against the depths.

It surprised her how quickly the work proceeded. She sang to herself happily as she painted. Her glass was empty when she set the brush down. She grunted and slid from the stool, plucked the glass from the table, and went to the kitchen.

She moved from room to room of the house, her steps unerring, studying the walls and the furnishings in the monochrome illumination. The moon, she thought, must be enormous tonight. She saw everything with the kind of clarity still spring water lends to objects underneath it, slightly magnified and wetly still.

"I have lived here," she said and paused, frowning to herself. There ought to be more to that sentence, she thought, but it seemed complete enough. She had lived here, for thirty years. She and Eugene. She and her work. She and her children, her friends, her dreams. Clients, plans, creditors, colleagues, arguments, laughter, love...regret.

"I regret, Eugene, that I must tell you I do not love you."

"I know. But I love you and that is enough."

"Is it?"

He shrugged, looking perfectly foolish in his nightshirt, pale ankles much too thin to support all his immanent hope. "You may borrow some of mine from time to time."

And there was the bed in which, together, they had lent each other what they could of affection, companionship, intent, and, from time to time, passion. Berthe came to believe that she was for Eugene little more than a mirror in which he saw his own feelings reflected back. She had tried to give him what she could but perhaps, in the end, even that had not been necessary. What do mirrors actually have of their own? Perhaps she might have found out with Edouard.

But Edouard had been a prism through which light bent onto his canvases. Whose soul would she have been reflecting with him?

The mirror still glowed in the studio. She shrugged and returned to her easel. There was still time to do another before the light faded.

DAWN DROVE HER TO BED. She slept fitfully for a few hours, then awoke to the blazing light of midmorning, her eyes slitted in pain. She went to her parlor and took down the heavy velvet curtains and put them up over the windows in her studio. She used old canvases to fill in the cracks where sunlight found a way in and, satisfied with the thick quality of the darkness, she went back to the easel.

Berthe wondered briefly at the certainty of her technique as she mixed new colors in the dark. She had learned over time not to question too much. Use the moment when it comes, Cassatt had told her, liberate the image before it escapes you. Her early work, Degas had said, had always relied too much on the intellect. Observation must not be inextricably joined to analysis. Then, when her eyes had threatened to fail, she had

taken the advice to heart and had learned how to respond first, then understand later. Still, it was all mirrors, and mirrors never satisfied.

The reflections in this mirror, though, never stayed still. She dipped her brushes, carried the pigments to the canvas, filled the vacant planes. A flicker, a shift, a change in the quality of illumination, all demanded a new canvas.

Her belly knotted finally and she went to the kitchen. It was night again. She found half a loaf of bread, the open end hardening. She broke it off and dipped it in wine and ate. As her hunger eased she stared out the window. She had bought this house, it had always remained hers even after she married Eugene. He had never asked that it be any different. It would not be anyway, she realized, since with his death it would have reverted to her after all.

"What was it you felt in me?" she asked.

She drew a deep breath, luxuriating in the sensation. She had not worked this hard, this intently for years. With Eugene's death the desire had all but vanished.

"I did not love you, but I miss you..."

"It is enough."

Berthe turned, peering into the darkness of the studio. The only light came from the mirror. More...? I am tired.

More.

Berthe opened her eyes slowly to the pounding on the door. She gazed up at the warmly lit ceiling of her bedroom, sleepily fascinated by the richness of color and the restful shifting of shadow from the trees outside her window. The pounding stopped and started again.

She rolled over. The myriad aches had melded into one general agony. Her head throbbed. She squinted at the window. A light breeze made the curtains dance gracefully.

Voices drifted up from below the window. Berthe sighed heavily and rubbed her eyes. The window was closer than the door, she decided, and pushed herself to her feet.

"Madame Morisot!"

Berthe leaned from the window and stared down at two men. One was broad-shouldered and dressed in workman's clothes with a worn,

shapeless cap on his head, the other was a bit taller, distinguished, with a beard, dressed in a brown suit. Both men looked familiar, but for different reasons.

"Yes?" she said.

"Are you all right?" the distinguished man asked.

"Yes, yes, quite..." Then she recognized them. François delivered her foods from the market. She smiled at him "I'll be right down. Forgive me, I've overslept."

Berthe pulled on her robe, embarrassed then. They must, she thought, think I'm mad, leaning out the window like that. What time was it, anyway? Wincing at each step, she descended the stairs to the kitchen. Her legs threatened to cramp, as if on the previous day she had walked twenty miles. She pulled open the door and François looked immediately relieved. He came in with a box and went straight to her pantry.

"Monsieur," she said to the other gentleman.

"We grew concerned," he said. "Are you well?"

"I don't know...I have just...I am not quite awake yet, Monsieur. Forgive me..."

"Not at all, forgive me. I hope I have not interrupted...?"

François went out and returned with another box. As he passed her Berthe saw a bunch of grapes and snatched them out. François did not seem to notice and continued to the ice box.

"I am afraid, Monsieur, I was unable to fulfill your request," she said around a mouthful.

He blinked, but otherwise his expression did not change.

"I expected word sooner, I admit," he said finally, "that you could not. But as the days passed I began to hope. May I see what you have?"

For a moment Berthe felt an intense urgency to refuse. Puzzled, she stood there eating her grapes, worrying at her feelings, until François cleared his throat.

"Should I bring more, Madame Morisot?" he asked when she looked at him. "You've eaten everything here."

"Is there enough wine?" she asked.

"Well, as much as you usually need for a week..." François seemed uneasy, embarrassed.

"If I need more I'll send for it, François. Thank you." She went to the

cabinet where she kept her market money and counted out his payment, then added a couple livres.

François thanked her and backed out of the door. Berthe headed matter-of-factly toward the studio.

"Come, Monsieur."

Berthe stopped three steps into the studio. It was still dark, only the light from the hallway showing her a vague path through the stacked canvases.

"Goodness," he said.

She picked her way to the window and threw open the curtains. Light flooded the space, momentarily blinding her. She turned away, fingers to her eyes until they adjusted.

Across the room he stood near the door, his own eyes wide with a powerfully checked astonishment. They were very clear, very pale, and she remembered then that she had wished to paint him.

Between them the studio was cluttered with canvases. One remained on her easel, but dozens filled the countertops, the desks, propped on the floor against table legs, walls, in the chairs and against stools. Berthe started counting them, stopped at thirty-three, and searched for the head.

"Ah," she said, realizing that the mirror blocked her view of it. She went around the opposite side of the easel, stepping over finished work stacked carelessly on the floor. How many had she done? Her fingers ached dully.

She stopped before the easel. On the board mounted there dark blues and greens whorled around a bold head, high brow below thick black hair that fell in a braid that draped over the right shoulder. Proud eyes stared out at the world from above high cheekbones. Bearded, strong, and somehow very old. A silver ring depended from his right ear. The entire effect was of imminent dynamism, as if he were about to leave the studio to tend to the conquest of a city or a country.

"I don't remember..." she began, then looked around at the other canvases. Men and women, different ages, different colors, different eras. Large panels and small cameo size works littered the studio. Many were plain people, unexceptional except for the antiquity of their clothes or the evident foreignness of their race or culture. A small clutch of them were more modern.

Her workplace was a wreck of used material. The remnants of paint

and brushes, broken charcoals, rags piled on rags, attested to the quantity of work produced.

The mirror stood where it had since — when?

"What day is this, Monsieur?"

"Wednesday"

"The date?"

"The fifth, Madame."

"Ah."

"When I did not hear from you after six days I became concerned."

"Yes, of course."

"Eh...where is the head?"

"Right there — "

She pointed to an empty space before the mirror.

The gentleman touched the countertop and dusted his fingers through a thick layer of chalky residue. He looked at the mirror, then inquiringly at Berthe.

She shook her head, dismayed, and looked about at the stacks of canvases. "I could not see it clearly, so..."

"You painted its reflection," he said, nodding. "Of course. Sensible." He waved at the paintings. "And these?" When Berthe did not reply, he nodded again. "Vlad Tsepes was an individual of many parts. Not a simple subject."

"I apologize, Monsieur."

"May I ask for what?"

"I...did not produce what you requested."

"On the contrary. These are quite satisfactory."

Berthe saw him study the paintings, recognized the intent expression of someone who understands the work, feels the innate quality and power. She wanted to argue, wanted, above all, an explanation, but she did not wish to disturb his pleasure.

Suddenly he went directly to one small portrait and lifted it with his fingertips. "This one...we were friends, long ago. He was the first I knew of that had been taken. I had forgotten..." He looked up, eyes moist, and nodded. "All of them must be his victims." He set the painting down and turned away from her for a moment. "It is more than I expected," he said finally. He looked up. "Now, the matter of payment."

"For what, Monsieur?"

"For all of them." He waved at the portraits cluttering the studio.

"Are you serious?"

He nodded.

Berthe shook her head. She named a price and wondered immediately what she had said.

"Oh, no, that is much too low. I will write a draft for what I believe is appropriate."

"As you wish..."

She began gathering the paintings, stacking them according to size. After a time she thought she recognized the look they all shared in common. Relief. She had seen it only a few times in her life, and in each instance it had been Eugene who had shown it to her. Once when she had agreed to marry him, again when she actually gave her vows. And again the hour of his death, though then it had been overshadowed by weariness. In each portrait she saw that same expression, over and over, the look of someone who has been laboring in an impossible task that is now complete.

When she turned she saw it again in her client's face. He seemed now so relieved that for a moment she did not know him. He gave her a bank draft, drawn on a Dutch bank, and smiled.

At the end of the day he had hired a wagon and workmen to load the collection. He paid them and gave them instructions where to take the cargo.

"Thank you, Madame. You have exceeded my expectations." He hesitated, then asked. "Do you wish still to paint me?"

Berthe looked up and saw him reflected in the mirror. His eyes were in shadow, but there were highlights within, faint and disappointing.

"Yes, I would. But it does not have to be at once."

"Then I will take my leave. I shall come when you request me."

She nodded absently and he withdrew. Gazing into the now blank mirror she knew that she would not paint him. He did not need liberating anymore.

Her fingers twinged. She went to the door and saw his carriage moving off down the street. Dusk was coming. She went to the kitchen and ate some beef, drank some wine, slowly, watching the light grow dim.

Berthe stood in the midst of her studio. The canvases gone, it seemed much too large. She walked around the desks and counters, circling her easel. She stopped and looked down.

Below the easel stood one more canvas. She frowned. He had forgotten one. She sighed impatiently and stooped to pick it up. Her back ached dully as she lifted it to the table.

"Oh."

It was her original charcoal sketch of the head, made the first day. The lines smeared and darted, a confusing mass of conflicting intentions around two blank areas where the eyes ought to be. Just as well it was left behind.

She brushed off the thick dust from the counter and propped it up. A senseless map. The mirror caught her eye and, smiling, she turned the canvas to face it. By the time she had it positioned properly, evening stole the last of the light.

She could start in the morning. She made her way to the door.

Glancing back, she saw her windows, deep blue, and, in the center of the studio, the mirror glowed.

"Oh," she said, "just one more, then."

Berthe returned to her easel and lifted a brush. "Of course, you were once a victim, too." ☞

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SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

'Tis the season for miracles. This month, instead of decking the halls with a Christmas story, we thought instead we'd bring you one mildly irreverent, thoroughly science-fictional look at a miracle, courtesy of Mr. Olton. Jerry notes that the Oregon hill which inspired this story actually does have a very rare crystal deposit on it—evidently it's one of only two places on Earth where such can be found. The other place is...of course...in the Middle East.

The Miracle

By Jerry Olton

WHEN THE SHORT, WIRY bush burst into flame less than ten feet in front of him, Greg Murry shouted "Holy Moses!" and leaped back in

surprise. His involuntary reaction didn't take him very far; he'd just panted and puffed his way up Pilan Hill's two-mile jogging trail and he was exhausted. He took another couple of steps backward, stumbling on a jagged rock in the trail, and looked around sheepishly to see who had set him up for the practical joke.

He was alone on the hilltop. Long stalks of green grass waved in the faint breeze wafting up the west slope, and a couple of turkey vultures circled overhead, but that was the only sign of life or motion anywhere nearby. The grass wasn't tall enough to hide anybody, and the nearest trees were a hundred yards downslope.

The bush, growing from a cleft in the rock outcrop at the very top of the hill, crackled and spat sparks. It was about thigh-high, and scraggly looking. Windswept. Greg had no idea what kind it was. In the evening light the

flames in its branches looked blue-hot, like a gas burner. There was no smoke, but a peculiar smell bit Greg's nose when he sniffed. A chemical smell. He took a cautious step toward the fire, wondering if somebody had left a camp stove whose fuel tank had burst in the sunlight, but he couldn't see any evidence of it. No sign of charcoal or ashes from a picnicker who hadn't put out his fire, either. Just the rock and the burning bush.

Yeah, right. A burning bush. Any minute now he'd hear a thunderous voice telling him to fall on his knees, and then a couple of stone tablets with the Federal Penal Code engraved on them would fall out of the sky. Greg didn't buy it. This was far more likely a fraternity prank, or even his roommates having fun at his expense. He looked around again to see if he could spot the idiots who were playing with matches and gasoline, but they must have had a remote igniter or something because the hilltop truly was empty.

The bush was burning, though, and Greg didn't have anything to put it out with. He'd taken a long drink from his water bottle before he'd started his hike, but he'd left the bottle in the car as he always did, counting on the drink to hold him until he got back. He'd left his T-shirt in the car, too, so he couldn't beat the flames out with that. He supposed he could try doing it with his cutoffs, but he'd just as likely catch them on fire and then have to run back down for help in his undies.

No, he would have to stamp it out, but to do that he'd have to wait until it burned down some. If he tried it now he'd singe off all his leg hair for sure, and probably melt his running shoes as well.

The leaves seemed to be lasting an awfully long time for such a bright blaze. Greg squinted, looking into the glare, and thought he could still see a green tinge to them. They weren't even curling. He held out a hand, but felt no heat. When a spark jumped out and hit his knuckle he felt *that*, though. It burned like crazy until he stuck it in his mouth.

Warily watching for more sparks, he backed off and waited for the fire to burn itself out. He was glad the grass was still green from spring rains; if it had been dry, the whole hill would have been ablaze by now.

It took a couple of minutes, but at last the flickering flames died down. Greg approached the bush cautiously, a little bit spooked by the whole business. The hair on his arms was standing up, and it felt like the hair on his head was, too.

The leaves hadn't burned, nor had any of the twigs. The bush looked as healthy as ever. Greg spent a long moment trying to decide if he was still agnostic. He'd always said it would take an unambiguous sign from God to make him a believer, but he wasn't sure if this was it. There could be a perfectly natural explanation for what he'd witnessed, though he had no idea what that explanation could be.

"Well?" he asked, figuring he'd give the Deity a chance to clarify His meaning, figuring also that one word couldn't be used against him very well if this was a practical joke and someone was recording him. But nobody responded either way. At last he said, "You'll have to do better than that," and raised his foot to crush out whatever flames might remain.

He stopped with his shoe still upraised. He didn't want to stomp on a perfectly good bush, especially the one growing at the very top of the hill, but the damned thing had been burning just a minute ago; he couldn't very well just leave it. He pondered his dilemma for another minute or so while his pulse returned to normal, but as his muscles relaxed again he realized he did have another option. That big drink of water he'd taken at the bottom of the trail hadn't *all* sweated away...

Grinning mischievously at the thought of peeing within sight of anybody who might be looking at the hill, he unzipped his shorts, took aim, and let go.

The flash of light when the stream of urine hit the ground at the base of the bush was like a strobe going off. Greg heard a *pow!* like a firecracker exploding, and felt every muscle in his body twitch in a single convulsion that sent him a couple feet into the air and six feet back, to land sprawling on his butt in the dirt path.

His entire groin felt as if he'd been kicked there, but his left thigh hurt even worse. When he sat up and ran a hand over it, his fingers came away red with blood. He'd landed on a sharp rock. Standing up, he zipped his shorts again and bent around to look at the wound. It wasn't pulsing, but it bled freely from a shallow cut about an inch long.

The bush stood mutely ignoring him, normal as could be. "To hell with you," Greg muttered, and limped back down the trail toward his car.

When he got home just before dinner, his blood-soaked T-shirt tied around his leg, his three roommates crowded around the bathroom to hear

his story while he cleaned himself up. He stuck to the facts, weird as they were, there seemed no point in embellishing anything. Even so, he didn't expect anyone to believe him, so he wasn't disappointed when his account of the burning bush that hadn't burned and how it had somehow thrown him backward drew derisive laughter from Dan and Tom.

Brian didn't laugh. Normally Brian was an overbearing pain in the ass and Greg had expected him to lead the assault, but this time he stood in the doorway quietly shaking his head until the laughter died down and then said in a level voice, "You got a direct sign from God and then you *pissed* on it? You're lucky you got away with your life."

When the laughter quieted a second time, Greg turned toward him with a blood-stained washcloth in his hand and said, "I thought of that. I thought about a lot of things while I was walking back down to my car and bleeding all over myself, but I don't think God had a whole lot to do with it. I mean, it was just this bush flickering blue and yellow and throwing off sparks. No voice or anything. Wouldn't there have been a voice if it was God?"

Dan and Tom laughed again, but whether at Brian's discomfiture or Greg's earnest reply Greg couldn't tell. He said, "Hey, you guys weren't there. It was strange as hell. Anybody would have considered the possibility, but there just wasn't any proof."

"No proof?" Brian's voice echoed in the bathroom. "A burning bush that isn't consumed isn't proof?"

Dan said, "We've got no proof *anything* happened, when it comes to that. Greg goes jogging and comes back with an owie and a silly story. Maybe he's putting *us* on, eh?"

"I saw the damned thing," Greg growled at him. "And it zapped me when I tried to make sure it was out. I don't know what the hell it was, but neither do you. Or you," he said to Brian.

There was an uncomfortable silence, then Dan said, "Okay, so tomorrow we go have a look."

When the four roommates jogged onto the rounded top of the hill the following afternoon, they found the bush already afire, crackling and glowing even more powerfully than the day before. Sheets of blue flame danced in its branches, and glowing fireballs swooped away in the breeze.

"Holy shit," Dan said.

"Wow," said Brian in an awe-stricken whisper.

"Told you so," said Greg.

They stopped a dozen feet or so away and watched the bush crackle and spit sparks.

"It's not fire," Tom pointed out. "It looks more like some kind of electrical discharge."

"Smells like it, too," Dan said. "Isn't that ozone?"

Tom nodded. "Static electricity used to build up on sailing ships and sparks would shoot from the masts and stuff. They used to call it Saint Elmo's Fire."

"This isn't a sailing ship," Brian said. "It's a sign from God."

Doug and Tom — and even Greg now that he had some support — chuckled at Brian's earnestness, but their laughter died pretty quickly. Everyone just stood there in a tight pack before the bush, waiting to see what would happen next. For a group of college guys around a fire, they were awfully quiet.

The flame — or static discharge, or whatever it was — began dying down. At last Tom, a botany student, stepped closer and peered into the crackling blue aurora. "I think it's a wild huckleberry," he said.

"Often noted for spontaneous combustion," Dan said in a mock-instructor voice.

"Not a hawthorn?" Brian asked wistfully.

"Sorry." Tom had longer hair than the others; wisps of it drifted upward as he stood by the bush. The mysterious fire was going out, though, and his hair began to lie flat again. The bush flickered for another minute or so, growing gradually dimmer until the flames could no longer be seen. Tom crouched down and reached out gingerly to touch it, but Brian said, "Don't!"

"Why not?"

"It's...not right."

"Oh, come on." Tom steadied himself with one hand against the rock, and yelped when his fingers touched the ground. "I definitely got a shock there," he said. His hair stuck out again.

"God doesn't want you to — "

"God doesn't give a shit," Tom said, and he grasped the bush with his other hand.

Nothing happened.

Greg let out a sigh. He'd been glad to have his story proven true, but he didn't want anybody to get hurt over it. "So what do you suppose is going on here?" he asked.

Tom looked up at the sky. It was mostly blue, with just a few puffy clouds off near the horizon. "Well, if we were in lightning territory I'd say there was a big static buildup here, but since we get maybe two thunderstorms a year in this part of the country, I don't think that's very likely."

"This isn't very likely," Dan pointed out.

"True. And it's got to be something like that. I think those sparks we were seeing were ball lightning."

Dan was a geology student. He said, "You get ball lightning from earthquakes sometimes."

Tom nodded. "Yeah, but we haven't had an earthquake around here in years."

"Not true," Dan said. "We get little ones all the time. We had one three days ago, in fact; one-point-six on the Richter scale. That's barely big enough to feel, but it might still be enough to generate ball lightning."

"But we got some just now," Tom pointed out. "And Greg got some yesterday, too. So unless we're getting a whole string of little quakes — timed perfectly for our amusement — I don't think that's it." He let go of the bush and stood up. "I think it's regular static electricity. When I got zapped, it was because my tennis shoes were insulating me from the ground. I didn't have a charge until I touched the rock with my hand, but then I did and that's why I didn't get shocked when I touched the bush. I was already charged up. Probably still am. Anybody want to test the theory?" He reached out toward Dan.

Carefully, like the alien and the kid in the movie *ET*, Tom and Dan stretched out their index fingers toward one another. When they were a quarter of an inch or so apart, a spark leaped between them and Dan jerked his hand back.

"Hah," Tom said. "Static electricity."

"That doesn't mean God isn't behind it," Brian said defiantly.

"God is a generator?" Greg asked.

"Maybe a big battery," Dan said.

"Or a crashed UFO buried in the hill," Tom said, "with its nuclear reactor still going."

"Get real," Brian demanded, but he was drowned out in the laughter as his relieved roommates speculated on the nature of God.

All the way back down the hill, they tried to top each other. "The mother of all Van de Graaf generators," one would say, and someone else would say, "Cats. Hundreds of cats rubbing up against glass rods."

BUT GOD, it turned out, was a burning bush. Or so claimed the horde of pilgrims who crowded the top of Pilan Hill the next day. Brian, of course, was at the head of the throng, and his picture made the front page of the newspaper that evening. Greg's name wasn't even mentioned, though Brian swore he'd told the reporters who had really made the discovery.

On the TV news that night, dozens of people claimed to have heard God speaking from the bush, commanding them to preach his gospel or warning that homosexuality was going to make everyone burn in Hell, even giving one woman what she claimed were sure to be winning lottery numbers. A priest and a rabbi were more cautious about declaring it a miracle, but they only got a few seconds of air time. The zealots made better press.

During the news broadcast, Dan and Tom started calling Greg "Moses," and kidding him about tablets. He went to bed early.

Greg's physics instructor, Dr. Richards, mentioned the phenomenon in class the next day, saying he was sure there was a perfectly rational reason for whatever was going on up there — if indeed anything was going on at all — which prompted Greg to give his account of what had happened to him. He told about going up the next day and how Tom had decided that it was static electricity.

"Theorized," Dr. Richards said. "Your friend was unable to *decide* anything, based on the evidence you've presented, but his *theory* is certainly sound. A little testing should either confirm or disprove it."

He arranged to hike up to see the mysterious bush that afternoon with Greg, but as they drove toward Pilan Park with their bag full of instruments in the trunk of Greg's car, they discovered a throng of people completely surrounding the hill, crawling over it like ants on an antpile

that had just been kicked. At the top of it, clearly visible even without binoculars, pulsed a flickering blue aurora at least ten feet high.

"It seems to have grown in intensity as well as popularity," Dr. Richards remarked as Greg drove slowly through the packed parking lot.

"I wonder if all the extra people have anything to do with it?" Greg asked. "It was bigger the second time, when there were four of us, than it was the first time with just me."

"Possibly," Dr. Richards said. "That's something to consider, but it could simply be growing in intensity for some other reason."

Greg had to stop while a line of white-robed Krishnas or some such people crossed the road in front of the car. All but the first one had their eyes closed and were holding onto the waist of the person in front of them. "It went out, though," Greg said. "Both times, the... whatever it was went out after a couple of minutes."

"It doesn't appear to be doing so now," Dr. Richards said, peering through the throng toward the top of the hill.

"We'll never make it up there," Greg said. "Not through this kind of a crowd."

A TV reporter had been standing beside the right front fender of the car, trying to get one of the white robed people to say something for the camera, but they ignored her. Frustrated, she turned around, looking for a better interview prospect. With a what-the-hell sort of shrug, Dr. Richards said, "I think I can get us a free ride. Hang on." He opened the door and stepped out beside the reporter. "Excuse me," he said. "I'm Dr. Richards from the university physics department. You wouldn't happen to have a helicopter, would you?"

She didn't, it turned out, but when word circulated among the other reporters that a physics professor wanted a ride to the top, one of the stations that did have one volunteered to ferry him up there. Within an hour Dr. Richards, Greg, two cameramen, and two reporters — one of them the woman they'd met first — were hanging on for dear life as the helicopter pilot hovered over a level spot on one of the hill's upper flanks, trying to clear a spot to land. Flying dirt from the rotor-wash finally accomplished the job, and he set down long enough for everyone to climb

out. Greg grabbed the backpack full of equipment they had brought from the university. The two cameramen walked backward in front of the reporters and Dr. Richards, clearing a path by refusing to acknowledge that anyone might be in their way, and in that fashion they made it to the top of the hill.

Two men and a woman, all three dressed impeccably in powder blue tailored suits and wearing enough gold jewelry to set off an airport security alarm, waited for them a few yards from the bush, which crackled and spit sparks fifteen feet into the sky. They each carried a bible open to the early pages; they'd evidently been reading aloud or giving a fire-and-brimstone sermon on Old Testament law until the helicopter disturbed them. Whichever, they had obviously set themselves up as figures of authority, either trying to cash in for themselves or else holding down the fort until Falwell or Robertson or one of the big players showed up. Brian was there, too, but he was three or four rows back among the common rabble. Evidently his stock had dropped when the preachers showed up.

Greg snickered when he saw them. "The father, the son, and the holy ghost?" he whispered to Dr. Richards.

The physics professor laughed. That seemed to be the signal the triumvirate was waiting for; the woman stepped forward and said, "Who are you?" They could hear her clearly even though there must have been thousands of people on the hilltop. Everyone was listening to hear the inevitable confrontation.

Dr. Richards said, "We came to see if we could figure out what was causing this."

"The Lord is causing it," one of the men replied, putting as much thunder in his voice as he could manage.

Dr. Richards grinned. "In that case, we'll find out how He's doing it. Greg, the electroscope, please."

Greg reached into the pack and brought out the glass ball with the metal rod piercing its side. Inside the sphere, a thin gold leaf stood out at right angles from the rigid plate at the end of the rod. Dr. Richards took it from Greg, turned to the cameras, and said, "An electroscope detects the presence of a static electrical charge. The farther out the gold leaf extends, the greater the charge. As you can see, we're in the presence of quite a charge indeed."

The woman pushed into camera range. "You have no power here!" she shouted. "This is holy ground."

"It's a public park," Dr. Richards said. "And it looks to me like there's plenty of power here for all of us." To Greg he said, "How about the grounding wire?"

Greg took the coil of 10-gauge house wiring out of the pack. They'd only brought fifteen feet of it, not expecting nearly as big a display as now flickered and spat before them, but Dr. Richards took it from him and uncoiled it anyway. It was stiff material; it had three thick conductors shrouded in heavy insulation and it would stick out about three feet before it bent under its own weight. He held one end as high as he could over his head, and extended the other end toward the bush.

"Don't!" all three of the bible-thumpers shouted, and about half the crowd echoed them.

Dr. Richards ignored them all. "Stand back," he warned. "This shouldn't be dangerous, but you never know." And with those words, he stuck the lower end of the wire into the ground at the base of the flickering, spark-spitting bush.

The display immediately went out, to reappear at the top of the conductor, a glowing spherical corona discharge three feet over the professor's upraised hand. Coming from a wire, the blue glow and flying sparks seemed almost normal.

Looking just a little like Thor, the god of thunder, Dr. Richards turned to face the cameras again and said, "There you have it. Definitely an electrical discharge."

The bible-thumpers, sensing that they were about to lose their hold on things, shouted, "These people are blasphemers! Stop them from desecrating the Lord's holy work!"

Not everyone in the crowd was a religious fanatic, but enough of them were. Roaring like a football audience when the home team scores a touchdown, they surged forward, the people in the rear pushing over the ones in front who didn't get out of the way. The woman preacher lunged for Dr. Richards, but he lowered the upraised end of the wire and forced her back with a shower of sparks. Greg and the reporters moved in closer to him while the two camera operators stood back to back like two besieged cavalymen in Indian country and aimed their cameras at the crowd.

The preachers tried a simultaneous assault, and this time Dr. Richards let them have a direct zap from the tip of the wire. He didn't even have to touch them; as soon as they drew close, an enormous arc leaped from wire to preachers, connecting all three in a momentary circuit that blew them backwards, their hair sticking straight outward and sparks dancing on their gold jewelry.

The flying preachers crashed into the people behind them, slowing their advance, but the crowd on the other side was still coming. "Behind you!" Greg yelled, and Dr. Richards swung around with the wire, spraying sparks and lightning bolts like water from a fire hose. The fortunate leaped back before the electricity hit them; the less so flew backward involuntarily when the current jolted their leg muscles.

Shouts of anger turned to shouts of dismay. Dr. Richards circled around and around, but even so, the pressure from behind as more people rushed the top of the hill kept forcing people into the path of the discharge. Greg expected to be overrun and crushed any minute now, like the soccer fans in Liverpool who'd been caught against a fence during a riot, but as the crowd thickened, their electrical contact with one another allowed the jolts to spread through the entire throng, and the ones in back began to turn away.

Also, the discharge seemed to be growing stronger. Now lightning sprayed out six or seven feet from the end of the wire, and grapefruit-sized balls of plasma broke free and drifted like balloons over the heads of the crowd. Occasionally one would descend and burst with a clap of thunder, sending another wave of static electricity coursing through the tangle of bodies.

Eventually the tide turned, and the angry mob of religious pilgrims became a fleeing horde of terrified refugees. The ground rumbled with their retreat as they fled down the flanks of the hill, careening into one another and screaming for God to save them.

"Looks like God's on the side of science for a change," Greg said, but then he looked up at Dr. Richards and realized he'd spoken too soon. The entire length of wire was glowing blue, and the discharge at its tip continued to grow.

"It's getting kind of warm," the professor said nervously.

"Can't you let go?" Greg asked.

"Not without getting zapped myself when the circuit breaks. And you guys will get it too if you don't move clear."

The reporters and camera crew backed away a few dozen feet, but Greg stayed put. He took off his T-shirt and wadded it up for Dr. Richards to use as a hot-pad, and helped support his tiring upstretched arm.

Greg hoped the camera guys were getting this. He and the professor looked impressive as hell, a little like the famous statue of the marines raising the flag atop Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima.

"It's starting to fade," one of the reporters said after a minute or so, and sure enough, in another minute the discharge had dwindled to a faint glow and an occasional spark at the tip of the wire. Dr. Richards nodded to Greg, who backed away, and then he tossed the wire aside and stepped backward himself.

Deprived of its lightning rod, the bush flickered a couple of times, like a guttering candle, then quieted again.

The hilltop still buzzed with the shouts of the angry, confused mob, which had come to a halt a quarter mile or so below. The shouts grew louder when people realized that the discharge had stopped, and the leading edge began moving back uphill.

"Uh-oh," Greg said.

"Quick, jump up and down!" Dr. Richards said. Without waiting for anyone else to start, he began hopping up and down like a kid on a pogo stick. His feet slapped the ground with each jump. Greg and the reporters stared at him as if he'd just lost his mind, but when the bush burst forth with another shower of sparks a few seconds later, they all began leaping and hopping like maniacs.

They were still hopping, and the bush was still crackling wildly, when the news helicopter came to rescue them a few minutes later.

"It's the piezoelectric effect," Dr. Richards said. He was standing before one of the student workbenches in his teaching lab, reporters and camera crews from dozens of papers and TV stations surrounding him. On the table stood a screw vise with a finger-size crystal in its jaws, and a wire running from the top of the crystal up to a heavy iron ring stand. An insulated clamp held the wire so its tip was a half inch or so from the metal.

"When you squeeze a quartz crystal," Dr. Richards said, turning the handle of the vise, "it generates electricity." Sure enough, a spark leaped from the wire to the iron stand. "And if you vibrate it, you get a pulse of current each time the crystal flexes." Dr. Richards wiggled the handle back and forth, and the spark popped each time.

"How does that account for what we saw on the hilltop today?" the woman reporter who had been there asked.

Dr. Richards said, "Quartz is one of the most common elements in rock. It occurs naturally in large crystals, sometimes *huge* crystals inside cooling volcanos, which is what all these hills around here once were. It's very likely there's a big quartz deposit inside Pilan Hill, one which resonates to the vibrations of people jogging or even just milling around on the surface."

Another reporter asked, "But why now? That hill's been there for millions of years, and nobody has ever seen it do this before."

"Thousands," Dr. Richards said with a grin. "Volcanos are relatively young, geologically speaking. But even so, that's a fair question, and the only answer I can give would have to be pure speculation, at least until we investigate further. What I expect happened, though, was that the minor earthquake we had a few days ago rearranged things inside the hill. Greg's footsteps as he jogged up the trail set up a resonant vibration that started the display, as did the footsteps of all the people coming and going later on. That would explain why it became so much stronger when the crowd became more, ah, agitated."

A different reporter, a man wearing a powder-blue suit, Greg noticed, asked, "Don't you think that explaining it in such cold, hard terms destroys the beauty of it? If what you say is true and it is just a pizza-whatever effect, that ruins the mystery of it for all those thousands of people who gained spiritual enlightenment from it, don't you think?"

"Wait a minute," Dr. Richards said. "You're saying people can gain enlightenment from ignorance. Are you sure you want to go on record saying that? You'd rather have people worshipping a static spark than understanding what caused it?"

"That's not what I — " the reporter said, but the laughter from everyone else drowned him out.

"The beauty lies in understanding," Dr. Richards said when the room

quieted down. He wiggled the crank on the vise a few more times, and tiny sparks shot out of the wire.

That became the sound bite on the evening news all over the country. It made Dr. Richards a celebrity for a few days, but then an airplane crashed into Dodgers' Stadium and that put an end to his time in the spotlight. Locally the hill stayed in the news a bit longer while the park service and various citizens' groups argued over what to do with it, but then election season came along and the press turned back to muckraking. Eventually the park service installed a wooden barricade around the hilltop and warning signs along the trail, then reopened it to the public. Fraternities took to holding parties on the hill at night, drumming and dancing until the aurora lit the entire hilltop. A few religious people and Flat-Earthers stubbornly came to worship the burning bush, but they seldom stayed long.

Greg avoided the hill completely for months, but he never found another jogging trail he liked as well, so one afternoon he finally decided to try Pilan Hill again. It wasn't as bad as he'd expected. He had to dodge a few people on the trail, but not so many that he had to break stride. And when he neared the top, he caught himself straining to see if his footsteps had charged up the bush yet. Experimentation had proven that only the top few hundred feet had any effect, but the exact boundaries changed constantly with humidity and air pressure and a dozen other variables.

A man stood before the barricade, holding a small child in his arms. The man had evidently tired of stamping his feet. He smiled when he saw Greg coming, then he turned with the child and pointed at the bush. "Watch," he said. "Watch the sparks fly."



Eric Reitan lives in Washington state and says that he devotes his life to three things: teaching philosophy, facilitating nonviolence workshops in prisons, and writing fiction. Item two mixes a bit with item three here in this dark fantasy about the land of the Fey and the land of ours and the places where they mix.

Faerie Storm

By Eric Reitan

FOR MOST OF HIS LIFE AERYK Severance had been looking for the doorway into Faerie. He knew it was there. He had known ever since the day of his mother's funeral, when he was five years old. First Mary Pratt had told him — Mary Pratt, his fellow searcher and his guide, who at six was pretty even then, and who in later years would be his lover. And then his murdered mother had come to tell him it was true. Ever since that day he'd searched, and in his searchings he'd learned one thing for sure: somehow the doorway was linked to music, and to madness, and to love. Mary Pratt became his guide because of all the people he had known, she was perhaps most closely linked to all three.

Mary Pratt had told him to expect a visit from his mother. She told him at the funeral. He was standing by the grave when he saw her first. It was raining, a cold drizzle that misted the surface of the coffin and seeped under the collar of his shirt. The minister was speaking of eternal rest and dust and peace; he spoke of a bloody sacrifice on a wooden cross, and of

God's love. Aeryk tried to understand it, but it was so hard. He was only five, after all.

His father's hand gripped his shoulder so tightly that it hurt, but Aeryk didn't complain. His father had always been that way, as long as he could remember: a presence at his back, unseen, made real by pain. He was often gone until after dark, working at that blocky brown building Aeryk had been in only once, working with papers and pens, *providing* for the family. Aeryk could almost pretend his father didn't exist, except it was his father who did the spanking, whenever he or Bobby had been bad (like the time that Aeryk had poured his grape juice in the bedroom wastebasket, or the time that Bobby had broken the crystal dove in the living room, but they'd blamed it on Aeryk)—three quick sharp blows, never more, and then stiff hands lifting him to his feet, and his father telling him not to cry, that men didn't cry.

But the pain now was almost comforting: it gave him something to focus on, something steady and solid and real. He concentrated on that pain while they lowered the damp black coffin into the pit. He concentrated on the pain when his imagination told him that Mommy wasn't in the pit at all; she was at home, waiting for them; she was making spaghetti, because she knew that Aeryk liked to eat spaghetti on cold, rainy days.

And then he saw Mary, who was spreading out a picnic, by a gravestone, in the rain. He saw her pour two glasses of milk, and put one on the picnic blanket, and drink the other in one long gulp. Then she laughed and said something to the gravestone, and she stroked it with her fingers in the way his mother used to stroke his face.

At last, when the thunk, thunk, thunk of piling dirt became less echoey, Aeryk slipped out of his father's grip and left the grim wet gathering to ask this girl what she was doing. She looked up when he approached, and she offered him, silently, a scone. He saw that it was wet, and shook his head.

She told him her name and suggested that he sit, but Aeryk shook his head again.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She smiled. "I'm having lunch with my Daddy."

Aeryk looked at the gravestone. "Your Daddy's dead," he said.

She took a bite from the scone that she had offered him. "There were

these two men," she said around the mouthful. "One was Chinese, the other American. They went to a cemetery together, to visit their mothers' graves. The American had a bunch of flowers, and the Chinese guy had a picnic basket. The American put the flowers on his mother's grave, then went to see what the Chinese guy was doing. The Chinese guy was spreading out a big picnic on his mother's grave. 'Do you really think your mother is going to come up and eat that?' said the American. The Chinese guy smiled and looked at the American. You know what he said? 'She will eat this meal at the same time that your mother rises from the dead to sniff your flowers.'" Mary took another bite from the scone. She chewed for a moment, staring at the gravestone. "My Daddy never did like flowers."

Aeryk shook his head. "You're weird."

Mary looked at him. "That your mother they're burying?" she asked. Aeryk nodded.

"Don't worry," she said. "She'll come back and talk to you. My Daddy did."

"Don't be stupid."

"I'm not stupid. Mommies and Daddies who still have little kids don't go to heaven when they die. Heaven's too far away. They go to Faerie, which is closer, so that they can keep an eye on you. There are doorways between here and Faerie, so sometimes they can even come and visit. Then, when you're grown up, they go to heaven."

"Who told you that?"

"My Daddy did, before he died, so I know it's true."

But Aeryk felt a lump in his throat, and a hot pulse behind his eyes, and he remembered his Mommy lying in the hospital bed with the broken mouth and the gauze and the big dark bruises around her eyes, and he remembered her pale hand — how he had squeezed it and squeezed it, willing her to squeeze him back. She hadn't been able to speak to him. She hadn't been able to say a word. "You *are* stupid," he said, and he turned and ran away.

He drove home in a rented limousine, sitting in the back with his father and his little brother Bobby, who was four. Bobby kept on opening and closing the ashtray in the door. His father stared straight ahead, his face expressionless except for a twitching in the eyes. The car smelled of leather. Outside, the cold gray world slipped by.

Aeryk listened to the click, click, click, of the ashtray being opened and closed, and suddenly he wanted to scream, to scream and scream. He wanted to smash his little brother's fingers in the ashtray and punch his father's face to make his eyes stop twitching. He wanted to rage and kick. He wanted thunder and wind and hail, not the anemic drizzle of the rain.

He clenched his fingers into fists and clamped his jaw, and held his breath against the burning sting of tears.

And then came the voice, as Mary Pratt had said it would. "Be still, little Aeryk. Be still." Aeryk turned and looked into his mother's face. She was sitting where his father had been. She wore the red silk dress that they had buried her in. Her cheeks were rosy from the mortician's make-up, but her throat was a near-translucent blue. Aeryk blinked and stared into his mother's pale eyes.

"Mommy," he said.

"Oh, Aeryk. I miss you so." And a pale hand reached out and closed around his fingers, and it was icy cold and far too tight. "There is something I must tell you," she said. "It is important that you listen very closely. Okay?"

Aeryk nodded mutely.

"Good boy. You are a good boy, Aeryk." She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them and looked into his face. "The world is a crazy place, Aeryk. It isn't safe. As much as I want it to be safe for you, as hard as I tried to make it safe, there are bad things here." As she spoke, the chill of her grip around his fingers started seeping up his arm. It ached in his elbow, his bicep. Creeping tendrils of cold stretched to his shoulder and then moved inward, reaching for his heart. "The man who made me die," she said, "the one who beat me and left me naked in my kitchen in a pool of my blood...." She stopped and her eyes slipped shut. When they opened again there was a fierceness in them, a terrible fire. "He is closer than you think, Aeryk. He is closer than you think."

Aeryk felt the ice grip his chest, and he wondered if his heart would stop. He fought to keep on breathing. "Are you in Faerie?" he whispered.

A tiny smile touched his mother's mouth, but the fierceness did not leave her eyes. "Faerie? You can call it Faerie if you like."

"Then I can go to you," he said. "I can go to you and I'll be safe."

"Oh, Aeryk," she said.

But then the pink and purple skin was peeling from his mother's face like pale rust, and her eyes shriveled in her sockets, blackening. Aeryk threw up his arms and he screamed. He screamed and screamed until he felt his father shaking him, and then he wanted to throw himself into his father's arms and press himself against his solid chest, but his father let go and turned away, and stared ahead with no expression on his face but twitching eyes.

AERYK DID NOT SEE Mary Pratt again for eleven years. He spent those years in search of Faerie. At first Aeryk thought the entrance would be a place, and in the evenings while Bobby and his father stared at the TV (Bobby drinking root beer, his father drinking Michelob), Aeryk searched the large old house in which they lived, and the woods around. He searched in every cabinet and closet, and especially the wardrobes, remembering the *Chronicles of Narnia*. He stalked through the basement, certain he was overlooking some hidden room, or a secret hollow which concealed an eldritch key. And then he'd wander through the woods behind the house, or climb a tree and sit in silent waiting, listening for the sounds of forest folk — the wood sprites and the dryads.

As he grew older, although he did not stop believing in a world of Faerie, his understanding of it became less literal, and he began to look for Faerie in the smell of spring flowers and the raging summer storms that sometimes crashed along the coast. He knew that there was something more than just this world of flesh and grief, something that was hinted at in the visions of the lunatic and in the thrill of music. He began to play the violin; and when he played, when the smell of rosin hit him like a drug and the resonations buzzed through his fingers and his jaw, when he played *La Folia* by Corelli and his fingers danced through the cadenza — the shimmers of the Faerie world were there, palpable, just out of reach. He could almost see its wild hillsides and its dreamy yellow skies.

And so he played, he played and he composed his own ragged melodies which — while often awkward and unrefined — swelled with his passion for the Faerie world, and sometimes came so close to bringing it alive that for a moment he believed that he would really cross the gap. While he played he often thought about his mother, and sometimes his harsh

dissonances in the lower registers were tonal paintings of her half-dead body on the kitchen floor. And often when he played there was another face he saw: the face of Mary Pratt, six years old and eating scones while sitting on her father's grave.

In all those years his father beat him only once, but it was enough. It happened when he was ten years old, when he still half-believed a doorway into Faerie lay hidden somewhere in the house. He was pretending that the entrance lay behind the display case in the kitchen, and if only he could move it out from the wall far enough, he could slip behind it and into another world.

But his efforts ended in disaster. The case came crashing down, and all the ornaments — the porcelain figurines his mother used to collect, and those blue Christmas plates from Sweden displayed along the upper shelf — were scattered and shattered in a moment of wild sound. Aeryk stood in silence, staring at the ruin, until his father came.

His father had been drinking. He always drank now, mostly beer. After Mommy's death his father had started coming home from work sooner, but he'd been no more present: he'd sit and drink and watch TV, and when the news came on he'd go to bed. Aeryk and Bobby moved quietly when their father was home, as if somehow they knew what lurked behind his eyes, waiting for a sound to set it free.

The first thing to hit him was his father's scream; then came the blows, one after the other, in the face, in the gut. Aeryk curled into a ball on the floor while his father kicked him, and for a moment he was sure that he would die. He looked up at his raging father, and as he looked into his father's face there was a change: a widening of the eyes, an opening of the mouth, a look of fear creeping in and driving out the rage. And his father looked around the room, the very room where his mother had been killed — and Aeryk saw the way his father began to shake, the way the self-loathing settled in. Aeryk closed his eyes and felt his own cold fear.

His father stumbled from the kitchen. After a time Aeryk rose to his feet and limped into the living room. His father was curled up on the sofa, clutching a pillow to his chest. Bobby stood at the edge of the stairs. Aeryk crossed the room and sat down on the edge of the sofa. He put a hand on his father's shoulder. He wanted very much to cry.

After that he played the violin for hours every day, while his father

closed inward on himself and shut out his children even more. The music became Aeryk's comforter.

He met Mary Pratt again along the Newport cliff walk, in the summer when he was sixteen. She was standing on the rocks with her back to the sea, looking at the great stone house which rose above the stretching grass like some European palace, whispering the mysteries of wealth. She was balanced on her toes, her body arched, her dark hair streaming in the wind. Her face was a mask of rapture.

He did not recognize her, but when he saw her he knew that in all his years of searching, the thing he had been looking for was her.

She did not seem to notice his approach, but when he stood before her, she turned her eyes to him and smiled lazily, as if coming awake. "Hello," she said. "I dreamed about you last night. We're going to be lovers."

"Lovers?" The word sounded strange to Aeryk. His friends in school had girlfriends, or boyfriends. They did not have lovers.

She jumped down off the rock and faced him. "Do you remember me?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"I remember you," she said. "Maybe it's your baby face. You haven't changed so much since you were little."

And then suddenly he knew. "Mary," he said. "Mary something. The one at the funeral."

Her smile was radiant, and she took his hand and led him along the cliff. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"To look for Faerie."

He followed where she led. He followed as she showed him all the secret places, the quiet corners of the world where magic lurked so near that he could taste it on his tongue. She took him to the cliff in Jamestown where the high school boys would go to prove themselves in foolish manhood rituals, leaping from the edge with their sneakers on to plunge into the still dark waters far below. And Aeryk, who had never had the urge to join the other boys in such displays of bravado, learned what it was like to jump and fall and hit the water: the sudden thrill as rushing air was turned to icy froth; the adrenal pulsing in his face and throat; the drag of

his shoes as they soaked up water like heavy sponges; the momentary confusion, not knowing which way led to air and life. And in the instant before breaking the surface: the silence, the fragmented light, the sense of utter peace and stillness. Aeryk knew he was on the brink of Faerie.

She took him to the coast at midnight and showed him how to hunt for crabs. And as the moon reflected in the rock-trapped pools she ran her fingers through his hair. In the shadow of the old lighthouse, as dawn splashed orange highlights on the sky, she let him touch the pink cream softness of her breasts.

They were together every day throughout that summer. Two weeks after he met her she shaved her hair over one ear, leaving behind a velvet fuzz, and she showed up at his door with lips painted black and a spider pendant hanging in the hollow of her throat. "I thought that I'd become a witch," she said.

"You look more like an angel to me."

Mary laughed. "Aeryk, Aeryk, Aeryk. You're always so *corny*."

He played his violin for her, while she lay at his feet with her eyes closed. He played his own compositions, and somehow in the midst of it, she began to sing, wordlessly — and her voice was pure and high and haunting, and it wove through the resonating violin like a thread of light: a perfect contrapuntal harmony that refined and purified his own rough-edged compositions. The sound of her voice made him ache, and almost cry. Soon he found himself improvising with her, voice and violin intertwined; and in the heart of it, steady at the heart of sound, they both could feel the gateway's presence.

Afterward they would have made love, had it not seemed so redundant. Instead they lay together on the floor, holding hands; and she told him they would be together forever, linked by music and madness and love.

A week later they found a stack of wooden planks in the garage. The wood had been there for years, but Aeryk had never paid attention to it. It was Mary who suggested that they build a tree house out behind the house. They built it in a week, working several hours every day. Mary found some old roofing tiles and some carpet remnants. They scattered old pillows in the corners and put movie posters on the walls. When they were finished it was clean and intimate. "Our love nest," Mary said, and Aeryk

laughed. Then they did make love, amidst the pillows, while robins watched with tiny, gleaming eyes.

He hardly saw his father at all that summer, but Aeryk was used to that. His father had stopped drinking after the incident in the kitchen, and he'd thrown himself into his work again: getting up before dawn, working at the office until nine at night, or sometimes ten. Bobby was out with his gang of friends all day, smoking or skateboarding or cruising the mall. The large old house was mostly left to Aeryk and to Mary. When others were at home, they had their love nest (their gateway) in the woods.

He never met her family. She said her mother was a drunk, and that they lived in a trailer park: an ugly, dirty place where men wore Wrangler jeans and the women still used light blue eyeshadow, somehow thinking that was beautiful. One month after they met, Mary stopped going home at night, and stayed with Aeryk in his room. He never introduced her to his family. There was no point. His father, slipping in and out in the dark, never said a word.

FAERIE CAME TO THEM at last, wild and real, with the storm. The hurricane took shape in the Atlantic ocean and swept toward land in the familiar way, threatening the Carolina coast. But then it started moving north, and it became clear that a piece of it might brush New England. Some of the locals made plans to drive inland for a few days, others shuttered up their houses and prepared to brave the storm. Aeryk's father left a note that he was leaving town, and that his sons should do the same. Bobby laughed when he saw the note, then told Aeryk not to expect to see him for a while, and he left the house.

Aeryk and Mary were left alone, and as they sat in the house watching the news reports and looking out the window at the deceptive sunny calm, they knew what was coming. At last it was coming, raging and seething: the doorway into Faerie. And they would wait for it, greeting its music and its madness with their love.

It was a magic fantasy of youth, a reckless dream: amidst the thunder and the wind they would make love, their bodies slicked and pounded by the rain.

The anticipation was almost more than they could bear.

They spent the evening before the storm reading to each other in Aeryk's room: fairy tales and passages from *The Lord of the Rings*. Later, when the storm arrived, they would go outside. Mary was downstairs in the kitchen, fixing herself some food, when the first plump raindrops splatted against the window. It was then that Aeryk's father came home. Aeryk was reading in his bed when he heard his father's car, and a strange flutter went through him. He sat up in bed, and he wondered if he should go downstairs. He heard the door open, and the rumble of his father's voice. Aeryk closed his book and set it aside, wondering why his heart was beating in his throat. And then he heard a grumble and a hiss, and then a crash as something shattered on the floor.

Aeryk ran out of his room and down the stairs, seeing his father's form vanish toward the back of the house, where the master bedroom lay. Mary was standing in the kitchen doorway. A plate of sandwiches lay broken at her feet. Her eyes glistened.

"What happened?" Aeryk gasped.

Mary's mouth worked silently. Her hand went to her throat.

Aeryk crossed the gap between them and tried to put his arms around her but she jerked back. "What happened?" he asked again.

Mary swallowed and looked down. She shook her head as if to clear it. "He called me your slut," she said. "'There she is,' he said. 'Aeryk's little slut.' And then he..." She looked down at the broken plate. "Oh, God. I made a mess."

"And then he what?" Aeryk took her by the shoulders, looking into her eyes.

Mary poked at a sandwich with her foot.

"And then what?" Aeryk resisted the urge to shake her.

Mary shrugged. "He said that maybe he should kill me, too."

The wind was picking up outside. The rain was drumming against the windows. The hurricane's full fury was still some time away.

Aeryk wanted to scream. He wanted to scream as badly as he had wanted to scream so many years ago, in the limousine, driving from his mother's funeral. He wanted to rage and kick and thrash. And he recalled the vision of his dead mother, sitting next to him and warning him: *He is closer than you think*. He remembered his father's twitching eyes.

He was bursting into his father's room before he knew that he'd left

Mary's side. His father was sitting on the bed. Aeryk struck him where he sat, struck him across the face with his fist, hard enough to knock him back. And then he leapt onto the bed, straddling his father's prone body, and grabbed him by the hair. Aeryk wanted to choke him, to strangle him, to make him pay for all the years of emptiness and coldness, to make him pay for the time that he was beaten, to make him pay for his mother's death. His father stared up at him in silence. Aeryk smelled the beer, as if his father had been bathing in it. He clenched his free hand into a fist and tightened his grip on his father's hair. "Why did you come back here?" he demanded.

His father opened his mouth, closed it. His eyes seemed glazed. "You better watch out for that slut of yours," he said. "One day you might walk into a room and find her naked underneath some other man. You never know when it will happen."

Aeryk let go of his father's hair. "Fuck you," he whispered.

He heard Mary walk in behind him. "Aeryk," she said. "Come on, Aeryk."

But there was a wetness in his father's eyes. "I don't know who he was," his father said. His head lolled off to one side. "They didn't expect me home. They were on the kitchen floor, like they couldn't wait to get into the bedroom. She was never that eager with me." Now that he spoke the words at last they came on top of each other in an urgent stream. "I killed him first. He wasn't very big, so he was easy to kill. Your mother fought harder."

"Oh, my God," breathed Mary.

Aeryk stared at his father's face, at the slackness of his father's mouth.

"It was his semen they found inside her." He closed his eyes. "That's why they never suspected me. The DNA didn't match. I broke a window from the outside, and buried our silverware with the man's body. Then I called the police."

"Oh, my God. Oh my God."

Aeryk stared in silence at his father. He heard the crack of his own jaw. He had known. In a way he had known all his life.

The wind was starting to whistle through the windows. "Why did you come back here?" he said at last.

His father let out a laugh. "For a minute there," he said, "I was hoping you would do it for me."

Aeryk rose. He stood over the bed, looking down on his father. He saw what he hadn't seen before, stuffed under his father's belt, like a tumor. "You should have done it long ago." It was not what he had meant to say.

"Aeryk," Mary whispered. She came up behind him and put a hand between his shoulder blades. He took a step back, into her, and her arms slipped around him. Her breasts pressed up against his back. The wind was starting to howl.

"Don't do it, Daddy," he said.

His father sat up slowly in bed. He took the gun out of his belt, looked at it, then tossed it away from him. It clattered on the floor. "I've always been too much a coward."

Aeryk turned away and left the room. Mary trailed after. He sat down on the edge of the sofa and stared at the floor, hearing the rising storm.

Mary sat down next to him. She put her arm around him and leaned her head on his shoulder. "Oh, Aeryk," she said.

"The storm," he whispered. "Faerie." He turned to look at her. "Is my mother still in Faerie?" he asked. "Or am I too old now? Time for her to move on into heaven."

"I think she's there," Mary whispered. "Your Mommy and my Daddy, both of them. Looking out for us."

Aeryk looked toward the window. The rain was beating on the glass and the wind was howling and swirling, searching for a way inside. "Do you hear it?" he said. "It's a symphony. You hear the tremolo in the cellos? The pounding of the timpani?" He lifted up a finger. "There. Triplets in the brass."

"And the violin," Mary said. "Weaving through it all, like that solo from Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*. You can't forget the violin."

The gun fired. They heard the dull thump of the body on the floor. The storm raged on, indifferent.

Mary rose slowly to her feet. The tears overflowed her eyes. She held out her hands to him.

Aeryk felt her fingers around his own, warm and soft and precious. He let her lift him up. He tried to speak, but choked. She led him toward the door. As always, he followed her.

The wind was wild. The rain came down as if the fundament of some heavenly ocean had cracked, and the seas were pouring down. They ran hand-in-hand through the storm, ducking falling branches, squinting and blinking as the water washed their eyes. They stopped at the base of the tree house and stripped off their clothes. They kissed each other in the raging wind, and even with the rain they could taste the salt of tears. Even with the rain, their naked skins were hot against each other. When their urgency became a pulsing fire in their faces — when grief and loss were mingled with the wild thrill — they climbed into the tree house, and there made love. The rain poured through the open windows and splashed against their joining flesh; and their moans were lost amidst the howling of the wind.

The storm still raged when they were through. They lay side by side on the tree house floor, fingers locked together. They listened to the storm's wild power, and let it beat down over them, cleansing them, washing everything away, everything but the swell of their desire.

Mary mouthed the words: "I love you." Her skin was flushed and beautiful. Aeryk took her face in his hands, and felt his love for her like a madness. He moved to kiss her on the mouth, and saw her sparkling eyes, and was just about to meet her parted lips when it all went white, blazing white, and — with a wild crashing noise — they crossed at last the threshold.

The sky beyond was pale blue with hints of yellow at the edges. It was quiet — the loudest thing seemed to be the sun. In the distance, perhaps, children played.

The picnic blanket was laid out carefully on the grass. The trees had leaves of greenish silver that gave a rustle like foil and then were still again. Milk and scones were set out, along with salad and raspberries and a dozen quartered kiwis. The gravestone had grown into a marble monument of dancing lovers (their ears pointed, their eyes slanted, the little nubs of horns upon their foreheads). Aeryk felt Mary's warmth beside him, and he turned to look at her. She was radiant and soft, and the redness of her cheeks was the redness of life. She looked at him, smiling. "They come," she said.

Aeryk turned. His mother approached, wearing gauzy white and feathers in her hair. There was a man with her he did not recognize, but he knew it must be Mary's father. He had Mary's eyes.

They sat down on the blanket. He met his mother's eyes. She did not speak, but she reached out and he took her hand and held it for a moment. There was sadness in her eyes.

They ate in silence. They ate until all the food was gone. Then his mother took his hand again, and at last she spoke. "You must love each other," she said. "For us." He glanced at Mary, but her eyes were on her father, who was smiling and reaching for her, cupping her cheek in his hand. She said something but he could not hear the words, as if a veil of privacy enveloped them.

Aeryk turned back to his mother. She was so beautiful, he'd forgotten how beautiful she was. "What about Daddy?" he asked.

She patted his hand and looked away. "He was always such a lonely man."

Aeryk heard distant laughter, the laughter of children. He heard the squawking efforts of a novice violinist. He looked around at the still blue sky. The sounds were coming from all around, drifting in and out. He heard the sobs of a child's temper tantrum, the wail of a hungry infant. A high voice sang *The Itsy Bitsy Spider*. The sounds came and went, distant, ephemeral: the children of the world.

"You are a beautiful violinist, Aeryk," his mother said. "We have all listened to you here." She smiled and patted his hand again. "Music," she said, "and madness, and love. Take these things with you, hold them close to you. In the hardest times, they will carry you."

The rescue workers found the lovers curled together, unconscious, amidst the shattered remnants of the tree house. An EMT commented that it was a miracle they lived. "Someone must have been looking out for those two," he said. They found the father in the house, dead by his own hand, the mouth beneath his ruined head shaped in an *oh* of surprise. There was also another body found in the woods outside the house, many years old and mostly decayed. It had been exposed by the beating rains.

The lovers were taken to the hospital, and cared for there. The nurses commented on how peaceful they seemed, as if they'd both seen angels. Or, perhaps, seen faeries.



British-born Hugh Cook has published twelve novels, mostly fantasy, including The Shift, The Questing Hero, and Lords of the Sword. He took time out from writing to complete a B.A. degree at the University of Auckland with a double-major in English and Japanese, and now he puts those degrees to use teaching English in Tokyo. At the moment, he's working on a new novel, entitled Business as Usual, but he set aside the book to provide us with this jaunt through time to a very strange place.

Heroes of the Third Millennium

By Hugh Cook

THE REELING FLICKER OF days slowed, steadied, froze. A quick look around. The time machine was sitting on grass. Beyond the grass: buildings. It was, recognizably, Central Park. Manhattan. With a huge sigh of relief — so far, no nuclear war — Jack Fabrax dismounted, clambering down onto the grass, lugging the heavy suitcase after him. God, what a weight! The time machine flickered and dissolved. It would return in precisely seventy-two hours.

There was a slight risk involved in sending the time machine back to 1962. Conceivably, Kevin Culdaneath would work out what had happened. Conceivably, Kevin would climb aboard the time machine and chase Jack into the year 2003. But. But Jack wanted to have the option of going back to 1962. In case things didn't work out as expected in this brave new world, the world of the Third Millennium.

Jack was sweating profusely by the time he had manhandled the suitcase to the street. He stood there, watching for a taxi. But did they still have taxis in the Third Millennium? And would his greenbacks be valid

currency? He had more than half expected shiny flying machines, the U.S. dollar replaced by the credit or some such thing, and the people to be walking round in fancy aerodynamic robes, or nothing at all.

But, outwardly at least, everything looked amazingly normal. The automobiles were styled differently, but were conceptually similar. And people still wore pants, shirts, shoes. Jack himself was dressed in a charcoal gray suit, a white shirt, a conservative tie, and nobody looked at him twice. A guy in a suit just like his walked by, talking to someone using a two-way radio, a dandy little gadget small enough to fit easily into the palm of your hand.

"Taxi!"

Jack had it all figured out. He would get the taxi to drive him round town. He would chat with the cabby and find out the latest.

The cab driver was a Negro. A really black Negro. Totally black — an amazing blackness which seemed to shimmer into blue. A woman. She had weird scars on her face, patterned scars like a sergeant's chevrons. Someone cut her? Then why didn't she have plastic surgery?

"Empire State Building," said Jack.

"What?"

"Empire State! The building!"

No dice. The Negress asked a couple of questions, but her English was barely intelligible. She had to be drunk. Angrily, Jack got out of the cab, hauled his suitcase out onto the sidewalk, slammed the door. How could anyone possibly not know the Empire State Building? Could it have been demolished? Torn down? Lost to memory? No, impossible.

Three taxis later, Jack finally found a driver who spoke English. Sort of. The cabby was from Afghanistan, wherever the hell that was, and took him along approximately familiar streets — the city's basic layout was still the same — to the Empire State Building. Outside the building, there were soldiers in strange blotched uniforms who carried weapons which looked strangely light, like children's toys.

Despite having figured out that inflation would brutalize his meager cash reserves, Jack was shocked by the cab fare. He bought a paper, a copy of the *New York Times*, meaning to check first the date, second the news, and third the stock market prices. He really wanted to know — and know fast — just what his stock certificates were worth.

The date? Thursday 6 November 2003. The right date, then. The stock market? Well, it still existed. Against all the odds, the world had survived the threat of nuclear war — so far — and the stock market was still in operation. However, Jack could find no listings for his stocks. Okay then, maybe the companies had changed their names. No problem. Work on that later.

How about the news? Well, that was problematical. Sport was sport, that much was the same. Sport was still sport, food was still food, fashion was still fashion and crime was still crime.

But. Apart from that, the news was unintelligibly weird, full of people and places and words and countries he had never heard of. Al Gore, Newt Gingrich, Nelson Mandela, Jason Race, Argan Vlastavich, Michael Jackson, Madonna and the Artist Formerly Known As Prince — who were these people? And if there was some guy “formerly known” as Prince, why the hell not say who he was now?

And what was HIV? And the Internet? And cyberspace? Ah, this makes sense. Ebola fever — a disease, evidently. Some kind of plague. But — Bangladesh? A place, evidently. A city? A country? And how about this? African American. What’s that? Okay. The woman in the taxi. Straight out of Africa — that would explain that total skin. An American straight out of Africa, an African American.

Then he found an article he did understand. About Germany. Nazis in Germany had demonstrated in Berlin, had fought with the police, had desecrated Jewish graves. Reading this, he went cold. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck. Germany! Not East Germany or West Germany but just straight Germany.

In that moment of shock, a glimmering of understanding came to him. He had not arrived in the future at all. Instead, he had been precipitated into an alternate universe. In this alternate universe, there had been no Hitler, no Holocaust, and Germany had not been divided into two separate countries. In this alternate universe, the terrors of Fascism belonged not to the past but to the present.

Not the future, but an alternate universe. That was his thesis, and a second article confirmed it. A dry, boring article about an economic agreement between Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia which was being negotiated in St. Petersburg. Evidently, in this alternate universe the

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics did not exist. There had never been a Lenin, so St. Petersburg had not become Leningrad. Presumably, there had never been a Second World War, either.

And, in this alternate universe, his stock certificates were probably useless. The companies — no listings for them on the stock exchange! — probably did not even exist. That meant he had no resources but the metal in the suitcase. The realization came as an appalling shock. He had figured it out so nicely. A little jump into the future, just forty-one years, enough time for his enemies to die and for his stocks to fatten up but not enough time for civilization to change out of recognition. But he had got it wrong.

"I need a cigarette," said Jack.

He pulled out a cigarette and lit up. Then, feeling hungry, he walked into an eatery, lugging his suitcase with him.

As he walked into the eatery, all conversation stopped. People looked at him, and stared. Immediately, Jack realized something was wrong. Hideously wrong. He had made some dreadful mistake. He glanced down at his fly, half-convinced everything down there was hanging out in public. But, no, it was all in order. He was a respectable guy in a suit.

His first impulse was to run. But — no! This was America, damn it. He was an American citizen, a citizen of the Free World, and there was no way he was going to be run off by a bunch of people staring at him. Besides, if something was wrong, he had to find out what.

So Jack walked up to the counter. Cleared his throat.

"Hamburger," he said. "Gimme a hamburger. Yeah, and a coffee. Black."

The guy behind the counter turned to his colleague. The two spoke together briefly in a language which was, unmistakably, Russian. Russian! What the hell were a couple of Russians doing serving food here in New York?

"You want ketchup on the burger?"

"Yeah."

Jack paid for his food, took it to a table, went back for the suitcase, then sat down to eat. As he did so, a woman got to her feet. She walked toward him. A very beautiful blonde, immaculately coiffed. As she approached, he smelled her perfume. Her eyes were an icy blue. She was an

angelic vision of Nordic perfection. Only one thing was wrong. She was not smiling.

"Hi," said Jack, speaking without bothering to remove the cigarette from his lips.

Without a word, the woman reached out. She plucked the cigarette from his lips. Then stubbed it out on his hamburger.

"Hey!" said Jack, half-rising.

Angrily, he grabbed her by the wrist. In response, with her free hand she sprayed him with something from a little aerosol can. He breathed red flame, and his world dissolved into a reeling whirl of agony. It was like when he had dived into that pool, back when he was a kid, and there had been too much chlorine in the water. The same watering pain in his eyes, only worse.

Slowly — choking, gasping, lungs heaving — Jack began to recover. Then one of the counteramen approached him.

"Mister," said the counterman, in heavy Russian-accented English. "You better get out. If you come back, I'll call the cops."

"Sure," said Jack, grabbing his suitcase. "Sure. Sure. I'm going."

Out on the street, he put down the suitcase and mopped his sweating brow. This was crazy! Something had gone dreadfully wrong back there — but what? He reviewed his own behavior. All utterly, totally normal. And now, out in the street, nobody was taking any notice of him, but for a couple of panhandlers — a hell of a lot of beggars on the street, now he thought about it. His clothing, though it came from 1962, was not significantly different from what conservative business types were wearing here in 2003.

Jack took a good look at those people. A hell of a lot of Asians on the street — tourists? Or what? And a lot of Mexican types, too, some speaking Spanish as they went by. Also: a muttering lunatic, a patently deranged man in rags who was talking to himself pretty loudly, gesticulating as he did so. Nobody called the cops to have the guy taken back to the nuthouse. Instead, everyone ignored the mad muttering lunatic, as if a dementing lunatic standing on the sidewalk in broad daylight in the middle of New York was the most natural thing in the world.

Some weird sights, then. But. There were still guys who looked just like Jack Fabrax. White guys in suits. Yet, somehow, the locals had picked

him as abnormal, aberrant in a truly intolerable way. Why? The only thing he could think of...maybe they thought he was queer. Yeah. That was possible. Maybe, in this brave new world, only sexually abnormal people wore business suits. That thought made Jack truly uncomfortable. He wished there was someone he could ask, someone who could explain it all to him.

But — time enough to figure it out later. Right now: business. Money was a priority. The suitcase was full of gold, and now it was time to start changing that gold to cash. Then he could start looking for information. And, if necessary, for a new set of clothes.

Inside of half an hour — phone, phone book, taxi — Jack found his way to a pawn shop. Showed just one gold wedding ring.

"You got some ID?"

A routine question. Low key, bored. But it riveted him.

Shocked him rigid.

"Yeah, yeah...hang on...must've left it in the car...."

And he backed out. Still reeling. Identity — he'd never even thought of the problem. Why not? Because it was totally insoluble.

Outside, a guy was hanging around, muttering stuff to passersby. Strange stuff.

"You want jash, amies, soft? You want jubes, man?"

Desperate enough to chance anything, Jack moved closer. He wanted to kind of inconspicuously drift closer, but that was impossible because of the weight of the suitcase. It was killing him. He was one red mass of flushed sweat.

"What you want, man?"

"What've you got?" said Jack, cautiously.

"Anything, man."

"How about a gun?" said Jack, too nervous to ask for what he really wanted.

"Sure, man. Get you a Glock, get you anything."

A Glock? Might be anything. A Third Millennium ray gun. A death ray super-blaster. Annihilate a tank at half a mile with its zap-ray. The alien name carried with it the authentic thrill of the new. But, no, he didn't really want a gun, not right now.

"Come on, man. What you want?"

"ID," said Jack, unable to conceal his nervousness.

"Five hundred bucks. Get you a green card, driver's license, social security number."

"Five hundred!" he said. His shock was genuine, unconcealable. Five hundred would clean him out. Hard on the heels of shock came anger. "Five hundred! You gotta be kidding!"

"Okay, okay! Chill, man, chill!"

They settled on \$250. Maybe too high — Jack got the impression he was getting the wrong end of the bargain. And he did not like, no, not one little bit, the visit to the grimy back room where they took his photo and produced the documents. But. He got out alive. Complete with ID. And the ID he had purchased was good enough, at least for the pawnbroker.

Five pawn shops later — slow and cautious does it — Jack was feeling better. All going to plan. He had done it. He had worked his big swindle back in 1962 and he had got away clean, escaping in the mad professor's time machine. Okay, so maybe his stock certificates were useless — if the newspaper stock market listings could be trusted, the tobacco companies in which he had so astutely invested simply did not exist in this alternate universe. But gold was still gold, money was still money, money could evidently buy anything, and he was going to be rich enough to start over.

Only problem now — he was right out of cigarettes. But, okay, there was a barber shop just across the road. Jack crossed the street, went inside. Looked for the cigarettes. And saw them, okay. Gray pasteboard packets with no brand names. Just the bare unadorned label CIGARETTES in black and a message in red saying THESE THINGS KILL YOU.

"Two packets," said Jack, gesturing.

"See your paper?"

"What?"

"You know. Your paper."

"No," said Jack. "I don't understand. I just want some cigarettes, okay?"

"Okay, you want the cigarettes, I need to see your paper."

"My what?"

"Your paper, man! Your prescription!"

"Prescription?" said Jack, bewildered.

"You are a registered addict, right? Right? Hey, you — I'm talking to you! You an addict, or what? You a cop?"

"No," said Jack. "I'm not a cop."

"Then get outta here. You don't get out, I'm calling the cops, right now."

Back on the sidewalk, Jack started to figure it out. In this alternate universe, smoking was quasi-illegal. Or was it? He wavered between belief and disbelief. Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. Maybe there was just something weird about that particular barber shop, that particular guy.

"Face facts," said Jack. "You just don't know."

Okay, then. It was time to do some serious research. Go to the library — that was it. In this alternate universe, the Empire State Building was in the same place, so the library should be in the same place too.

Only — it wasn't.

Well. The steps were there. And the lions. But the rest of it was a bomb crater, roped off with yellow plastic tape. Jack stood there staring, stunned.

"What you looking at?"

Realizing his mouth was open, Jack closed it. Blinked. Focused on the stranger who had addressed him. A girl. Well, sort of. Pretty weird-looking girl. A blonde with a bunch of rings in her nose and a ring through her eyebrow and a semi-pornographic tattoo of a big-breasted mermaid writhing up the side of her neck.

"Hi," said Jack, weakly.

"Yeah," she said. "Hi."

Then she laughed, as if he had said something outrageously funny, and stuck out her tongue at him. With shock, Jack saw there was cold white metal riveted right through her tongue. Sick, sick, sick! Really psycho stuff! A pretty girl, and she had stuck something right through her tongue.

Then something clicked. Suddenly, Jack understood. The dementing lunatic he had seen talking — almost shouting — on the street. The incomprehensible, disoriented cab drivers, who scarcely seemed to know Broadway from Fifth Avenue. The insane Nordic woman with the staring blue eyes who had stubbed out his cigarette on his hamburger. The guy at the barber shop who — bizarrely — had demanded a prescription when he asked to buy cigarettes.

It all made sense. All the data hung together. Given one simple insight

— given one simple thesis — Jack was suddenly able to organize a thousand different pieces of data into one simple, internally consistent picture. Now he had a simple Explanation of Everything. New York had been converted into one big lunatic asylum. Obviously.

"Ah," said Jack.

Ah. Eureka. I have it. Now I understand! That was why nobody had called the cops to take away the dementing lunatic. The guy did not have to be taken to the asylum because he was already in the asylum, together with the madwoman with the staring eyes who had tried to gas Jack with her Third Millennium aerosol weapon — his eyes were still sore and smarting — and this psycho kid with the mutilated tongue. That, doubtlessly, explained why armed soldiers were guarding the Empire State Building. The building was, presumably, the administrative headquarters of the lunatic asylum — a place to which the inmates were forbidden access.

"Want some cancer?" said the girl.

"Some what?" said Jack.

"You smoke."

"I do?"

"Your hands. Your teeth."

Jack's fingers were, in a way which was not uncommon in 1962, stained with nicotine. His teeth likewise.

"You selling cigarettes?" said Jack.

"Twenty bucks. One packet."

Even allowing for inflation, that was an incredible price.

But Jack was down to his last cigarette.

"Deal," he said, producing a twenty.

In response, the girl dipped her hand into her crotch —

Her crotch!

Jack reeled. She was wearing a man's jeans. Yes. He was not hallucinating it. A man's jeans, with the zip going right up the front, following the line of her, her —

The twenty was gone, snatched away, and the cigarettes were in Jack's hand. He dropped them. He felt sick. A pretty girl, and she was dressed in this sick, totally obscene lesbian fashion. And Jack had a clear contrasting vision of his lost sweetheart, the adorable Amy Zebrolooda,

whose pants had little zips on the side, little zips which, consonant with feminine modesty, made no obvious reference to her, her —

"You don't want them?"

The girl stooped, reached down for the cigarettes. Jack stepped on them, keeping them safe. Despite their provenance, he was going to keep them. He needed his nicotine.

"Okay then," said the girl.

And she was gone, retreating down the street. After fifty yards, she turned, and made a rude sign. Yes. More evidence. He was trapped in a lunatic asylum, that was for sure.

"Spare me one?"

A man's voice. Who?

Turning, Jack saw a bearded man who looked as if he was dressed for a hunting trip.

"Sure," said Jack, relieved by the normality of the encounter, the normality of someone trying to bum a cigarette off him.

Jack opened the packet and the stranger took a cigarette. Jack lit it for him with his gold lighter.

"You're a brave man," said the bearded guy.

"It's a free country," said Jack.

"Is it?"

"Well," said Jack, considering. "It should be."

"Yeah," said the bearded guy.

"You hunt?" said Jack.

"Sure thing," said the bearded guy.

"Me too," said Jack, establishing common social ground, disowning his charcoal gray suit. "Sarnac Lakes, ever heard of them?"

"Sure," said the bearded guy. "Up near Mt. Marcy."

Jack got the impression that he had bridged the sartorial gap which separated them. They had established common ground. They were both hunters, woodsmen, smokers of tobacco.

"So," said Jack, gesturing at the bombed-out ruins of the library, "when did this happen?"

"Where you from?" said the bearded man.

"Me?" said Jack. He wavered, poised on the edge of fiction. Then decided to risk the truth. He needed to find out what was going on in this

alternate universe. And fast. "I'm...I'm from the past. Kind of. An alternate universe. I'm from 1962."

"That so?"

"Yeah. I, uh...came in a time machine."

"Aliens help you?"

"Aliens?" said Jack, startled. "No. There was this guy, Angus Void. Mad professor type. He built this, this...time machine."

"You sure you not with the aliens?"

"I'm sure."

The bearded man looked around, as if checking for hidden observers.

"Name's Vance," he said. "I'm with the militia."

"The militia?" said Jack.

"Not here," said Vance. "You come with me."

They ended up in a place in Brooklyn, where the streets were full of people speaking Russian. Vance explained the site had been carefully chosen — "Last place anyone would look for us." Once they were safe in the hideout, up above a karaoke bar (whatever karaoke was), Jack told his story.

Jack expected resistance. Skepticism. But, to his surprise, Vance accepted the entire story without a single objection, as if time travelers from the past were no big surprise. Vance seemed to have — how to put it? — a special capacity for belief. A special capacity to filter information and, automatically, to know what was true and what was not.

With relief — just to confess was a relief, and to confess and be believed was a double relief — Jack told everything. How he fell in love with Amy Zebrolooda, the mad professor's beautiful female assistant. How he lost Amy to Kevin Culdaneath, his slick and very rich rival. How he took revenge by conning Kevin, swindling him out of millions. The bulk of the money went into tobacco stocks, and some he converted to gold. Then he stole the professor's time machine and fled into the future.

"Or so I thought," said Jack. "But something's out of whack. This place is strange beyond comprehension, I need someone to explain, I need to know what's going on."

"Okay then," said Vance. "You've come to the right guy."

Then Vance explained.

In this universe, America was ruled by a totalitarian federal government

which had a lock grip on newspapers and television. The government had been infiltrated by space aliens, and was using a much-dreaded fleet of black helicopters to organize mass abductions of unsuspecting citizens. Once the aliens got hold of the citizens, they were subjected to unspeakable medical practices, including torture and brainwashing.

The aliens' long-term strategy was to use the resources of the federal government to break the will of the people to resist, and to take away their weapons—assault rifles, machine guns, flame throwers, shoulder-launched rockets, all confiscated, in outright defiance of the Constitution. Once America's strength had been broken by a combination of brainwashing and disarmament, the alien invasion fleet currently waiting out in the Oort Cloud would land openly, and the conquest would proceed.

At first, Jack found this stuff hard to believe. It was — well, from the perspective of a nice, normal guy from 1962, it was wacky. No other word for it. Like old-fashioned science fiction from back in the 1950s, the 1940s, whenever.

"You don't believe me, huh?" said Vance.

"I didn't say that," said Jack.

"Jack," said Vance, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "You know what a computer is?"

"Sure," said Jack. "A, a, you know. Adding machine. Well — thinking machine, that's more like it. IBM. In my world, we got this company, IBM."

"Yeah, IBM, okay, we got IBM too. Jack, let me show you something."

Then Vance took Jack into the secret back room and showed him the computer, which was like a TV screen hooked up to a special kind of typewriter.

"You can use this," said Vance. "Over the telephone. Talk to other people. The Internet, that's what we call it. Federal government, they got the newspapers, the TV. But we've got the Internet."

It was a simple concept, and Jack got the hang of it inside of five minutes. The computers talked to each other, and there was no way the federal government could stop it, there were just too many machines, too many telephone lines.

"They got a bunch of new laws," said Vance. "Arrest us, switch us off, shut us down, throw us in jail. But, bottom line is, they can't stop us."

It took another five minutes for Jack to learn how to actually use the Internet. Then Vance gave him a list of Internet addresses and left him to it.

For two days solid, Jack hid out in Brooklyn, chain-smoking black market cigarettes and burrowing deeper and deeper into the revelations of the Internet. Alien landings. Alien spaceships hiding behind comets. Supposed American senators who were actually aliens in disguise. The miracle of recovered memory, which had allowed a defiant human spirit to fight back against the invaders. Recipes for helping you determine if you yourself had actually been an alien at some stage of your personal evolution.

In the closed, claustrophobic confines of the hideout, the constant reiteration of the hideous truth was overwhelming. It was all there. Anatomical drawings of aliens. Diagrams of alien space ships. Recordings, covertly made, of interrogations in which aliens grilled captured citizens. The secret plans used to brief the crews of the black helicopters. The federal government's protocols for the planned establishment of the concentration camps. The secret Russian bases, complete with Russian tanks, which had already been built on American soil with the connivance of the American government.

The vision of New York as one big lunatic asylum had already been forgotten. Instead, Jack was in the grip of a much more persuasive, much better documented Explanation of Everything. An essentially simple, internally consistent picture which gave him a hard grip on the confused, fragmented and at times totally bizarre reality he had encountered on the streets.

Overwhelmed by the impact of the Internet, Jack forgot all about checking out the history of tobacco stocks or inquiring into the rise of the Nazis in Germany. His attention was entirely given over to the authoritative, immaculately presented, intensely detailed accounts of horror brought to him by the Internet.

In the face of this horror, the militias were fighting back. The militias were secret armies consisting of people like Vance. Having begun their campaign of armed resistance by blowing up federal buildings and assassinating federal officials, they were now moving into a new phase of freedom fighting, escalating their campaign by targeting foreign embas-

sies, nuclear power stations, airports, subway trains and prominent public buildings of any description.

"So," said Vance, at last. "What do you think?"

"I'll level with you," said Jack.

"Yeah?"

"It's like this," said Jack, taking a big breath. "I can't handle it. I've got to go back. I'll be in big trouble, but it's better than this."

"Hey," said Vance. "It's your life. I won't stand in your way."

And so, seventy-two hours after his arrival, Jack was standing there on the grass of Central Park, waiting for the time machine to return. Vance was there too, together with a couple of his militia buddies, all three of them equipped with absurdly small cameras with which to film the scene.

On schedule, the time machine shimmered into existence. Only there was something wrong. The machine arrived in a cloud of dust and smoke, and from it there breathed a dreadful stench of burnt hair and roasted flesh. The thing in the driving seat grimaced at Jack, its seared face one mass of burns.

"Jack," said the thing.

It was Kevin. Kevin Culdaneath. Kevin — his rival, the man who had stolen Amy's heart.

"Kevin," said Jack. "What happened?"

"They nuked us," said Kevin. "Nuclear war, Jack. Nuclear war."

And then he said no more, because he was dead. In the ensuing silence, Jack heard crackling flames, and realized the time machine was well alight. It was burning. No way to put out the flames. No way to build another one. The designer of the time machine, Angus Void, was undoubtedly dead.

Back in the world which Jack had come from, the world of 1962, the conflict between the monolithic tyranny of the Soviet bloc and the Free World had proceeded to its inevitable conclusion: a nuclear exchange which must, surely, have reduced the world to ruin. And Jack was stuck here, forever, stuck in an alternate universe in which New York had been taken over by people from Russia, Mexico, and the heart of Africa, in which space aliens had subverted the Constitution of the United States of America and a tyrannous federal government had set out to crush the

rights of the people, making cigarette smokers into abhorred criminals and forcing free speech to retreat to the Internet.

"Hey!" said a cop, arriving at the run. "What happened?"

"No idea," said Vance. "We just got here."

"Get anything on video?" said the cop, glancing at the little cameras.

"No," said Vance. "We were too late."

Then, as a growing crowd began to gather, Vance and his buddies discreetly retreated, taking Jack with them.

"Well?" said Vance. "What you want to do?"

It was an easy question to answer. Back in the world Jack had come from, the lost world of 1962, the Free World had been prepared to risk nuclear war to defy the Soviet Union. In this alternate universe — freedom, free speech, Constitutional rights were surely still worth fighting for. To Jack, his destiny was plain. It was to join the militia: the heroes of the Third Millennium.

"Me?" said Jack. "I'm with you."

And they took it from there. ☞





SCIENCE

PAUL DOHERTY & PAT MURPHY CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE GRAVITATIONAL KIND

SOME OF THE best fantasy tales begin somewhere perfectly ordinary, take a left turn, and end up somewhere fantastic. You begin in Kansas and end up over the rainbow in Oz. You step into an old wardrobe and find yourself in Narnia.

Science sometimes works the same way. In this column, we're going to start with an ordinary baseball and an ordinary basketball, and we're going to end up on a grand tour of the solar system.

Trust us. It all connects up in the end.

BOUNCING BALLS

You know about bouncing balls, right? You drop a tennis ball and it bounces. Give a moment's thought to how high it bounces. It bounces fairly high if it's just out of the pressurized can. It doesn't bounce much if it's been lying

around and the dog's been chewing on it. But even if it's fresh out of the can — hey, even if you're using a super bouncy super ball — it never bounces higher than you were holding it when you dropped it, right?

When you drop the ball, gravity pulls it down and it picks up speed. It hits the ground and squashes at the moment of impact. As the squashed ball springs back to its original shape, it pushes on the floor and the floor pushes back. The force of the floor pushing against the ball throws the ball back up into the air.

To follow the bounce of the ball, scientists keep track of its energy. Energy, as you probably know, can't be created or destroyed. It can change from one form to another, but there's always the same amount of it around. When you lift the ball above the floor, you give it a certain amount of potential energy. When you drop the ball, that potential energy becomes kinetic energy, the

energy of motion. That kinetic energy becomes the energy that deforms the ball. During the squashing some of the ball's energy dissipates as heat (bringing us that much closer to the Heat Death of the Universe, a subject with which Pat is obsessed and which will probably be the topic of a future column). The rest of the energy goes back into motion, carrying the ball back into the air. But because some of the ball's energy was lost as heat, the ball doesn't bounce as high as its starting point.

Knowing all this, you might figure that a ball could never bounce back higher than the height from which you dropped it. Right? Ah, don't agree too fast. If you've been reading this column for a while, you know that the world is sometimes tricky and things aren't always what they seem.

THE EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE

At the Exploratorium, we believe in experimenting. About a year ago, we were working with authors Susan Davis and Sally Stephens on *The Sporting Life*, a book about the science of sports. In the name of research, one day we took a variety of balls into the cavernous interior of the Exploratorium.

Standing amid an array of basketballs, tennis balls, golf balls, table tennis balls and baseballs, Paul held a tennis ball a meter above the ground and dropped it, watching how high it bounced. He repeated the experiment with other balls, one by one. All of the balls bounced back up to a height of less than three-quarters of a meter, always lower than their starting point. A quiet crowd gathered to watch the experiments.

Then Paul held a tennis ball on top of a basketball and dropped the two balls together. The tennis ball took off like a rocket, shooting over Paul's head. The crowd gasped. Paul grinned and took a bow. The crowd came to life and made us repeat the experiment again and again, suggesting other ball combinations.

Try the experiment for yourself! (Don't trust us. Surely you know better than that by now.) Get a larger, more massive bouncy ball and a smaller lighter ball. Some combinations that work well are a tennis ball and a basketball or a table tennis ball and a golf ball. Hold the more massive ball under the light ball and drop them at the same time.

Really. Try it. You'll be amazed. That feeling of amazement you get when you see an unexpected result

is one of the great joys of science and should not be missed.

So what's going on here? We'll get to that in a minute. First, let's take a visit to outer space.

THE GALILEO SPACECRAFT

Back in the early 1980s NASA had a problem. They had been planning to launch the *Galileo* spacecraft to Jupiter. In NASA's original plan, the spacecraft was to be propelled directly toward Jupiter by a powerful Centaur rocket. That rocket was to have been carried into orbit by the space shuttle.

It was a fine plan — until the *Challenger* disaster in January of 1986. After that explosion, NASA reexamined the safety of carrying a liquid-fueled rocket inside the shuttle and decided that the risk was not acceptable. They began to investigate other alternatives.

They could launch the *Galileo* using the weaker, safer solid-fueled IUS (Inertial Upper Stage). But the IUS could not provide enough thrust to overcome the pull of the sun's gravity and propel the spacecraft to Jupiter.

What a dilemma! To solve it, NASA drew on the ideas of a mathematics graduate student at the University of California at Los An-

geles: Michael Minovitch. We don't know if Minovitch ever dropped basketballs and tennis balls together, but his ideas relied on some of the same principles.

To get a feel for Minovitch's idea, think of the *Galileo* spacecraft as a table tennis ball and the planet of Venus as a basketball. What NASA did, in essence, was bounce the *Galileo* spacecraft off of Venus to give it a velocity boost. Then NASA bounced the spacecraft off of the Earth twice to send it shooting toward Jupiter, a maneuver known as a "gravity assist."

How do you bounce a spacecraft off a planet? Let's take a closer look at how a gravity assist works. If you only look at half of the picture, it all seems pretty straightforward. If you drop a spacecraft into a planet, the gravitational attraction of the planet speeds it up, just like a dropped ball speeds up on its way to the floor.

Let's assume that you've very carefully aimed your spacecraft so that it doesn't actually hit the planet. Instead, it executes a near-miss. (An interesting aside here: that's basically what an orbit is. A near miss that goes on and on and on. A spacecraft in orbit is always falling toward the planet, but always missing.)

The spacecraft misses the planet, but doesn't get to keep that speed it gained. After the spacecraft races past the planet, gravity slows it down on the way out, just as the ball slowed down on its way up. In the end the spacecraft leaves the planet with the same speed with which it arrived.

How can we set this up so that passing the planet gives the spacecraft a boost? To figure out what's going on, let's take another look at the bouncing balls and why they act as they do.

FOLLOW THE BOUNCING BALLS

Consider a tennis ball riding piggyback on a basketball, starting from rest in Paul's hands at one meter off the floor. The balls accelerate toward the floor and are going about 4 meters/second when they hit. The basketball hits the floor first and reverses direction, heading up at 4 meters/second. The tennis ball is still going down at 4 meters/second.

At least, that's how fast the tennis ball is going if you're watching it from the point of view of someone standing on the ground. But suppose you were a tiny person standing on the surface of the bas-

ketball? (Or, as Paul would prefer to put it, suppose you were watching from the frame of reference of the basketball.) From the point of view of someone standing on the floor, the basket ball is traveling up at 4 meters/second and the tennis ball is traveling down at 4 meters/second. But from the surface of the basketball, you'd see the tennis ball traveling toward you at 8 meters/second. Its speed relative to you would be 8 meters/second.

You can compare this shift in viewpoint to driving down the road at 60 mph. On the other side of the double yellow line, a car is coming toward you at 60 mph. Relative to the road, you're traveling 60 mph and the other car is traveling 60 mph. But that car's speed relative to you is 120 mph.

So the tennis ball smacks into the basketball and heads in the other direction. Since little energy is lost in the collision, the tennis ball leaves the basketball at nearly the same speed at which it arrived. Since the basketball is more massive than the tennis ball, the collision doesn't slow down the basketball much. The basketball slows down only a little, but the tennis ball reverses direction. From your viewpoint on the basketball, the relative speed of the balls remains constant. After

the balls hit, they separate at 8 meters/second.

Ah, but here's the tricky bit. For a person standing on the ground and watching the balls bounce, the picture is different. That basketball is still moving up at 4 meters/second. The tennis ball is going up 8 meters/second faster than the basketball. So the tennis ball is moving up at 12 meters/second, rather than just 4 meters/second. That's triple its original speed with respect to the Earth! With triple the speed, the ball bounces 9 times higher than the height from which it was dropped, shooting over Paul's head and amazing the spectators.

Where did it get the energy to do this? From the basketball. It takes a lot of energy to move that massive basketball. When the tennis ball bounced off the basketball, it gained just a little bit of the basketball's kinetic energy. If you watched really closely, you'd notice that the basketball dropped in tandem with the tennis ball doesn't bounce quite as high as the basketball dropped alone. That's because the tennis ball stole a bit of the basketball's energy.

The general rule is easy: when a ball bounces off a much heavier moving object and doesn't lose any energy to heat, it reverses its direc-

tion and gains twice the speed of the object it bounced off of. This means that a baseball leaves the batter at the speed the pitcher threw the ball plus twice the speed of the bat (minus some speed lost as a result of heat). It also means that a golf ball that is initially at rest leaves the tee at twice the speed of the striking club head (again minus a bit for heat).

FOLLOW THE BOUNCING SPACESHIP

To understand how a gravity assist works all you need to do is be able to add and subtract and imagine yourself in different places (that is, different frames of reference). The *Galileo* spacecraft made a gravity assist flyby of Venus and then returned to Earth for two more gravity assists. We'll consider one of the Earth flybys.

Let's say you've got a spacecraft that's orbiting the sun at the same distance as the Earth. The spacecraft is traveling in the opposite direction as the Earth — the Earth orbits counterclockwise, and the spacecraft orbits clockwise. Both are going 30 kilometers/second. The spacecraft comes in toward the planet, swings around it in a cosmic do-se-do, and leaves

moving out along the line of its approach.

That's your planetary collision. You may wonder why we call this a collision, since the spacecraft didn't touch the planet. Pat expresses her sympathy with this sensible viewpoint, but defers to the physicists. Paul and his fellow physicists consider this a collision even though the spacecraft doesn't touch the Earth. When pressed, Paul says he draws a large sphere around the Earth and watches the spacecraft enter and leave the sphere. If the spacecraft changes its direction or speed while inside the sphere he knows it has suffered a collision. He says that the spacecraft interacts with the planet via the long range force of gravity, not the short range electric forces that come into play when two objects actually touch.

And Pat concedes that Paul has a point. The spacecraft does act just like it has collided with something. The relative speeds of the two objects don't change. The spacecraft and planet come together at 60 kilometers/second and leave each other at 60 kilometers/second. That's what you see if you are standing on the Earth, which is the equivalent of the basketball in this situation.

But suppose you back up and look at the collision in the frame of the distant stars. Then you see a spacecraft initially orbiting the sun at 30 kilometers/second. After the collision, you see a spacecraft going 90 kilometers/second! The spacecraft is leaving the Earth at 60 kilometers/second and the Earth is going 30 kilometers/second so $60 + 30 = 90$! That's fast enough to give the spacecraft escape velocity from the sun, heading out toward interstellar space along a hyperbolic trajectory.

The spacecraft gains kinetic energy in this encounter. Where does that energy come from? Well, just as the encounter with the tennis ball slowed the basketball down, the encounter with Galileo slowed the Earth down. Not by much, of course. When the Galileo spacecraft swung by Earth, it sped up by over 16,000 kilometers per hour with respect to the sun, and the Earth slowed down by 10 billionths of a centimeter per year. A reasonable trade, we figure.

MAKING A GRAND TOUR OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM

Michael Minovitch's calculations showed NASA that the outer planets were lined up so that they

could be used to give a spacecraft multiple gravity assists to allow that spacecraft to make a grand tour of the solar system. *Voyager 2* used a gravity assist from Jupiter to propel it to Saturn, then used Saturn to get to Uranus and finally used Uranus to get to Neptune and beyond. *Voyager* is now continuing on its way out of the solar system. In all of its gravity assists, it gained escape velocity and will never return to the sun.

We haven't figured out how to do that with a tennis ball just yet. Paul has calculated that it is theo-

retically possible for a ping pong ball to achieve escape velocity if you balance it on a stack of nine other balls, each much more massive than the one above it, each bouncier than a superball. Drop the balls 5 meters, or one story, under these ideal circumstances, and the ping pong ball would end up traveling at 11 kilometers/second, fast enough to escape the Earth's gravitational field. We haven't managed that yet, but we're still experimenting.

For additional information, visit Pat Murphy's Web site at <http://www.exo.net/jaxxx/>. ☞

COMING ATTRACTIONS

THOSE OF YOU who were expecting Paul J. McAuley's "Back Door Man" this month will just have to be patient—we had a sudden change of plans. Look for that previously-announced story in March.

Meantime, we can assure you that next month's issue will feature a new novelette by Esther Friesner. As you might expect from its title, the story "How to Make Unicorn Pie" is a serious academic examination of forgotten medieval culinary techniques. Really. Honest. Okay okay, it's none of the above, it doesn't even have any recipes in it—but we think you're going to love it anyway. It does have a unicorn in it, and it's delectable, and that's all we'll say for now.

(Punsters might think that next month's issue has a pie theme to it when they see Kathi Maio's film column, but they'd be wrong.)

Also on tap is a chilling new SF story from Ian Watson, "Caucus Winter," and coming soon we'll have stories by Terry Bisson, Robert Reed, Peter David, and a newcomer by the name of Paolo Bacigalupi. It's all leading up to our fiftieth anniversary next October; we think '99 is going to be a good year indeed.

Oh my, this issue seems to be heralding winter with more darkness than light—including the compelling entomological fantasy that follows. Fortunately, Dale Bailey has a bit of good news to shine into the gloom: he reports that he and his wife Jean expect to become parents soon. Says Dale, "I'm hoping to handle imminent fatherhood with a little more aplomb than Gerald Hartshorn, but needless to say, the ongoing experience casts the story in a new light for me..."

In other words: parents-to-be, don't try this at home.

Cockroach

By Dale Bailey



AFTER THE EXAMINATION, they gathered in the office of the physician, an obstetrician named Exavious that a friend of Sara's had recommended.

Dr. Exavious specialized in what Sara termed "high-risk pregnancies," which Gerald Hartshorn took to mean that his wife, at thirty-seven, was too old to be having babies. Secretly, Gerald thought of his wife's...condition...not as a natural biological process, but as a disease: as fearsome and intractable, and perhaps — though he didn't wish to think of it — as fatal.

During the last weeks, a seed of fear Gerald had buried almost ten years ago — buried and *forgotten*, he had believed — had at last begun to germinate, to spread hungry tendrils in the rich loam of his heart, to feed.

And now, such thoughts so preoccupied him that Gerald only half-listened as Dr. Exavious reassured Sara. "We have made great strides in bringing to term women of your age," he was saying, "especially women in such superb condition as I have found you to be..."

These words, spoken in the obscurely accented English which communicated an aura of medical expertise to men of Gerald's class (white, affluent, conservative, and, above all, coddled by a network of expensive specialists) — these words should have comforted him.

They did not. Specialist or not, the fact remained that Gerald didn't like Exavious, slim and Arabic, with febrile eyes and a mustache like a narrow charcoal slash in his hazel flesh. In fact, Gerald didn't like much of anything about this...situation. Most of all, he didn't like being left alone with the doctor when Sara excused herself at the end of the meeting. He laced his fingers in his lap and gazed off into a corner, uncertain how to proceed.

"These times can be difficult for a woman," Exavious said. "There are many pressures, you understand, not least on the kidneys."

Gerald allowed himself a polite smile: recognition of the intended humor, nothing more. He studied the office — immaculate carpet, desk of dark expensive wood, diplomas mounted neatly on one wall — but saw no clock. Beyond tinted windows, the parking lot shimmered with midsummer heat. Julian would be nuts at the office. But he didn't see how he could steal a glance at his watch without being rude.

Exavious leaned forward and said, "So you are to be a father. You must be very happy, Mr. Hartshorn."

Gerald folded and unfolded his arms. "Oh... I guess. Sure."

"If you have further questions, questions I haven't answered, I'd be happy to..." He let the rest of the sentence hang, unspoken, in the air. "I know this can be a trying experience for some men."

"I'm just a bit nervous, that's all."

"Ah. And why is that?"

"Well, her history, you know."

Exavious smiled. He waved a hand dismissively. "Such incidents are not uncommon, Mr. Hartshorn, as I'm sure you know. Your wife is quite healthy. Physiologically, she is twenty-five. You have nothing to fear."

Exavious sighed; he toyed with a lucite pyramid in which a vaguely alien-looking model of a fetus had been embedded. The name of a drug company had been imprinted in black around its base. "There is one thing, however."

Gerald swallowed. A slight pressure constricted his lungs. "What's that?"

"Your wife has her own fears and anxieties because of the history you mentioned. She indicated these during the examination — that's why she came to me in the first place. Emotional states can have unforeseen physiological effects. They can heighten the difficulty of a pregnancy. Most doctors don't like to admit it, but the fact is we understand very little about the mind-body relationship. However, one thing is clear: your wife's emotional condition is every bit as important as her physical state." Exavious paused. Some vagary of the air-conditioning swirled to Gerald's nostrils a hint of his after-shave lotion.

"I guess I don't really understand," Gerald said.

"I'm just trying to emphasize that your wife will need your support, Mr. Hartshorn. That's all."

"Are you suggesting that I wouldn't be supportive?"

"Of course not. I merely noticed that — "

"I don't know what you noticed, but it sounds to me — "

"Mr. Hartshorn, please."

" — like you think I'm going to make things difficult for her. You bet I'm nervous. Anyone in my circumstances would be. But that doesn't mean I won't be supportive." In the midst of this speech, Gerald found himself on his feet, a hot blush rising under his collar. "I don't know what you're suggest-ing — " he continued, and then, when Exavious winced and lifted his hands palms outward, he consciously lowered his voice. "I don't know what you're suggesting — "

"Mr. Hartshorn, please. My intent was not to offend. I understand that you are fearful for your wife. I am simply trying to tell you that she must not be allowed to perceive that you too are afraid."

Gerald drew in a long breath. He sat, feeling sheepish. "I'm sorry, it's...I've been under a lot of pressure at work lately. I don't know what came over me."

Exavious inclined his head. "Mr. Hartshorn, I know you are busy. But might I ask you a small favor — for your sake and for your wife's?"

"Sure, please."

"Just this: take some time, Mr. Hartshorn, take some time and think. Are you fearful for your wife's welfare, or are you fearful for your own?"

Just then, before Gerald could reply, the door from the corridor opened and Sara came in, her long body as yet unblemished by the child within.

She brushed back a wisp of blonde hair as Gerald turned to face her. "Gerald, are you okay? I thought I heard your —"

"Please, Mrs. Hartshorn, there was nothing," the doctor said warmly. "Is that not correct, Mr. Hartshorn? Nothing, nothing at all."

And somehow Gerald recovered himself enough to accede to this simple deception as the doctor ushered them into the corridor. Outside, while Sara spoke with the receptionist, he turned at a feathery touch on his shoulder. Dr. Exavious enveloped his hand and gazed into his eyes for a long and obscurely terrible moment; and then Gerald wrenched himself away, feeling naked and exposed, as if those febrile eyes had illuminated the hollows of his soul, as if he too had been subjected to an examination and had been found wanting.

"I don't know," Gerald said as he guided the Lexus out of the clinic lot. "I don't like him much. I liked Schwartz better."

He glanced over at Sara, her long hand curved beneath her chin, but she wouldn't meet his eyes.

Rush hour traffic thickened around them. He should call Julian; there wasn't much point in trying to make it back to the office now. He had started to reach for the phone when Sara said, "He's a specialist."

"You heard him: you're in great shape. You don't need a specialist."

"I'd feel more comfortable with him."

Gerald shrugged. "I just didn't think he was very personable, that's all."

"Since when do we choose our doctors because they're personable, Gerald?" She drummed her fingers against the dash. "Besides, Schwartz wasn't especially charming." She paused; then, with a chill hint of emotion, she added, "Not to mention competent."

Like stepping suddenly into icy water, this — was it grief, after all these years? Or was it anger?

He extended a hand to her, saying, "Now come on, Sara —"

"Drop it, Gerald."

"Fine."

An oppressive silence filled the car. No noise from without penetrated the interior, and the concentrated purr of the engine was so muted that it seemed rather a negation of sound. A disquieting notion possessed him: perhaps there never had been sound in the world.

A fractured series of images pierced him: rain-slicked barren trees, black trunks whipped to frenzy by a voiceless wind; lane upon lane of stalled, silent cars, pouring fumes into the leaden sky; and Sara — Sara, her lips moving like the lips of a silent movie heroine, shaping words that could not reach him through the changeless air.

Gerald shook his head.

"Are you ready to go home or do you need to stop by the library?" he asked.

"Home. We need to talk about the library."

"Oh?"

"I'm thinking of quitting," she said.

"Quitting?"

"I need some time, Gerald. We have to be careful. I don't want to lose this baby."

"Well, sure," he said. "But quitting."

Sara swallowed. "Besides, I think the baby should be raised at home, don't you?"

Gerald slowed for a two-way stop, glanced into the intersection, and plunged recklessly into traffic, slotting the Lexus into a narrow space before a looming brown UPS truck. Sara uttered a brief, piercing shriek.

"I hadn't really thought about it," Gerald said.

And in fact he hadn't — hadn't thought about that, or dirty diapers, or pediatricians, or car seats, or teething, or a thousand other things, all of which now pressed in upon him in an insensate rush. For the first time he thought of the baby not as a spectral possibility, but as an imminent presence, palpable, new, central to their lives. He was too old for this.

But all he said was: "Quitting seems a little drastic. After all, it's only part-time."

Sara didn't answer.

"Why don't we think about it?"

"Too late," Sara said quietly.

"You quit?"

Gerald glanced over at her, saw a wry smile touch her lips, saw in her eyes that she didn't really think it funny.

"You quit?"

"Oh, Gerald," she said. "I'm sorry, I really am."

But he didn't know why she was apologizing, and he had a feeling that she didn't know why either. He reached out and touched her hand, and then they were at a stoplight. Gerald reached for the phone. "I've got to call Julian," he said.

THE INSTRUMENT of Gerald Hartshorn's ascension at the advertising firm of MacGregor, MacGregor, & Turn had been a six-foot-tall cockroach named Fenton, whom Gerald had caused to be variously flayed, decapitated, delimbed, and otherwise dispatched in a series of TV spots for a local exterminator who thereafter had surpassed even his nationally advertised competitors in a tight market. Now, a decade later, Gerald could recall with absolute clarity the moment of this singular inspiration: an early morning trip to the kitchen to get Sara a glass of grapefruit juice.

That had been shortly after Sara's first pregnancy, the abrupt, unforgettable miscarriage that for months afterward had haunted her dreams. Waking in moans or screams or a cold accusatory silence that for Gerald had been unutterably more terrible, she would weep inconsolably as he tried to comfort her, and afterward through the broken weary house they had leased in those impoverished days, she would send him for a bowl of ice cream or a cup of warm milk or, in this case, a glass of grapefruit juice. Without complaint, he had gone, flipping on lights and rubbing at his bleary eyes and lugging the heavy burden of his heart like a stone in the center of his breast.

He remembered very little of those days besides the black funnel of conflicting emotion which had swept him up: a storm of anger more deleterious than any he had ever known; a fierce blast of grief for a child he had not and could not ever know; and, sweeping all before it, a tempest of relief still more fierce, relief that he had not lost Sara. There had been a close moment, but she at least remained for him.

And, of course, he remembered the genesis of Fenton the cockroach.

Remembered how, that night, as his finger brushed the switch that flooded the cramped kitchen with a pitiless glare, he had chanced to glimpse a dark anomaly flee pell-mell to safety across the stained counter. Remembered the inspiration that rained down on him like a

gift as he watched the loathsome creature wedge its narrow body into a crevice and disappear.

The Porter account, he had thought. Imagine:

Fade in with thunder on a screaming housewife, her hands clasped to her face, her expression stricken. Pan recklessly about the darkened kitchen, fulgurant with lightning beyond a rain-streaked window. Jumpcut through a series of angles on a form menacing and enormous, insectoid features more hidden than revealed by the storm's fury. Music as the tension builds. At last the armored figure of the exterminator to the rescue. Fade to red letters on a black background:

Porter Exterminators. Depend On Us.

But the piece had to be done straight. It could not be played for laughs. It had to be terrifying.

And though the ads had gradually softened during the decade since — though the cockroach had acquired a name and had been reduced to a cartoon spokesman who died comically at the end of every spot (*Please, please don't call Porter!*) — that first commercial had turned out very much as Gerald had imagined it: terrifying. And effective.

And that was the way Gerald thought of Fenton the giant cockroach even now. Not in his present animated incarnation, but in his original form, blackly horrifying, looming enraged from some shadowy corner, and always, always obscurely linked in his mind to the dark episode of his lost child and the wife he also had nearly lost.

But despite these connections, the Porter account had remained Gerald's single greatest success. Other accounts had been granted him, and though Fenton was now years in the past, promotions followed. So he drove a Lexus, lived in one of the better neighborhoods, and his wife worked part-time as an aide in the children's library not because she had to, but because she wanted to.

All things considered, he should have been content. So why, when he picked up the phone to call Julian MacGregor, should the conversation which followed so dishearten him?

"I can't make it back in today," he said. "Can the Dainty Wipe thing wait until Monday?"

And Julian, his boss for twelve years, replied with just a touch of...what? Exasperation?

Julian said: "Don't worry about that, I'm going to put Lake Conley on it instead."

Lake Conley, who was a friend.
Why should that bother him?

Gerald came to think of the pregnancy as a long, arduous ordeal: a military campaign, perhaps, conducted in bleak territory, beneath a bitter sky. He thought of Napoleon, bogged down in the snow outside of Moscow, and he despaired.

Not that the pregnancy was without beneficial effects. In the weeks after that first visit to Dr. Exavious — at two months — Gerald saw Sara's few wrinkles begin to soften, her breasts to grow fuller. But mostly the changes were less pleasant. Nausea continued to plague her, in defiance of Exavious's predictions. They argued over names and made love with distressing infrequency.

Just when Gerald grudgingly acquiesced in repainting a bedroom (a neutral blue, Sara had decided, neither masculine nor feminine), he was granted a momentary reprieve when Sara decided to visit her mother, two hours away.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she told him in the flat heat promised by the August dawn.

Gerald stepped close to her with sudden violent longing, he inhaled her warm powdered odor. "Love you."

"Me too." She flung an arm around him in a perfunctory embrace, and then the small mound of her abdomen interposed itself between them.

And then she was gone.

Work that day dragged through a series of ponderous crises that defied resolution, and it was with relief that Gerald looked up to see Lake Conley standing in the door.

"So Sara's out of town," Lake said.

"That's right."

"Let's have a drink. We should talk."

They found a quiet bar on Magnolia. There, in the cool dim, with the windows on the street like bright hot panes of molten light, Gerald studied Lake Conley, eleven years his junior and handsome seemingly by force of will. Lake combed his long hair with calculated informality,

and his suit, half as expensive as Gerald's, fit him with unnatural elegance.

"Then Julian said, 'Frankly, Sue, I don't see the humor in this.' I swear, she nearly died." Lake laughed. "You should have seen it, Gerald."

Gerald chuckled politely and watched as Lake took a pull at his Dos Equis. He watched him place the beer on the bar and dig with slender fingers in a basket of peanuts. Weekly sessions in the gym had shown Gerald that the other man's slight frame was deceptive. Lake was savagely competitive in racquetball, and while it did not bother Gerald that he usually lost, it *did* bother him that when he won, he felt that Lake had permitted him to do so. It bothered him still more that he preferred these soulless victories to an endless series of humiliations.

Often he felt bearish and graceless beside the younger man. Today he just felt tired.

"Just as well I wasn't there," he said. "I'm sure Julian would have lit into me, too."

"Julian giving you a rough time?"

Gerald shrugged.

Lake gazed thoughtfully at him for a moment, then turned to the flickering television that played soundlessly over the bar. "Well," he said with forced cheer. "Sara doing okay? She big as a house yet?"

"Not yet." Gerald finished his drink and signaled for another. "Thank God for gin," he said.

"There's a good sign."

Gerald sipped at the new drink. "Been a while. We're not drinking much at home lately."

"What's the problem, Gerald?"

"She could have told me she stopped taking the pill."

"Sure."

"Or that she was quitting her job."

"Absolutely."

Gerald didn't say anything. A waitress backed through a swinging door by the bar, and tinny rock music blasted out of the kitchen. The sour odor of grease came to him, and then the door swung shut, and into the silence, Lake Conley said:

"You're not too happy about this."

"It's not just that she hasn't been telling me things. She's always been a little self-contained. And she's sorry, I know that."

"Then what is it?"

Gerald sighed. He dipped a finger in his drink and began to trace desultory patterns on the bar. "Our first baby," he said at last. "The miscarriage. It was a close call for Sara. It was scary then and it's even scarier now. She's all I have." Bitter laughter escaped him. "Her and Julian MacGregor."

"Don't forget Fenton."

"Ah yes, the cockroach." Gerald finished his drink, and this time the bartender had another waiting.

"Is that it?"

"No." He paused. "Let me ask you this: you ever feel...I don't know...weird about anything when Kaye was pregnant?"

Lake laughed. "Let me guess. You're afraid the baby's not yours." And then, when Gerald shook his head, he continued, "How about this? You're afraid the baby is going to be retarded or horrifically deformed, some kind of freak."

"I take it you did."

Lake scooped a handful of peanuts onto the bar and began to arrange them in a neat circle. Gerald looked on in bleary fascination.

Another drink had been placed before him. He tilted the glass to his lips.

"It's entirely normal," Lake was saying. "Listen, I was so freaked out that I talked to Kaye's obstetrician about it. You know what she said? It's a normal by-product of your anxiety, that's all. That's the first baby. Second baby? It's a breeze."

"That so?"

"Sure. Trust me, this is the best thing that's ever happened to you. This is going to be the best experience of your life."

Gerald slouched in his stool, vastly —

— *and illogically*, some fragment of his mind insisted —

— relieved.

"Another drink?" Lake asked.

Gerald nodded. The conversation strayed listlessly for a while, and then he looked up to see that daylight had faded beyond the large windows

facing the street. A steady buzz of conversation filled the room. He had a sense of pressure created by many people, hovering just beyond the limits of his peripheral vision. He felt ill, and thrust half an ice-melted drink away from him.

Lake's face drifted in front of him, his voice came from far away: "Listen, Gerald, I'm driving you home, okay?"

Opening his eyes in Lake's car, he saw the shimmering constellation of the city beyond a breath-frosted window, cool against his cheek. Lake was saying something. What?

"You okay? You're not going to be sick, are you?"

Gerald lifted a hand weakly. Fine, fine.

They were parked in the street outside Gerald's darkened house. Black dread seized him. The house, empty, Sara away. A thin, ugly voice spoke in his mind — the voice of the cockroach, he thought with sudden lucidity. And it said:

This is how it will look when she's gone. This is how it will look when she's dead.

She won't die. She won't die.

Lake was saying, "Gerald, you have to listen to me."

Clarity gripped him. "Okay. What is it?"

A passing car chased shadow across Lake's handsome features. "I asked you out tonight for a reason, Gerald."

"What's that?"

Lake wrapped his fingers around the steering wheel, took in a slow breath. "Julian talked to me today. He's giving me the Heather Drug campaign. I wanted to tell you. I told him you were depending on it, but..." Lake shrugged.

Gerald thought: *You son of a bitch. I ought to puke in your car.*

But he said: "Not your fault." He opened the door and stood up. Night air, leavened with the day's heat, embraced him. "Later."

And then somehow up the drive to the porch, where he spent long moments fitting the key into the door. Success at last, the door swinging open. Interior darkness leaked into the night.

He stumbled to the stairs, paused there to knot his tie around the newel post, which for some reason struck him as enormously funny. And then the long haul up the flight, abandoning one shoe halfway up and

another on the landing, where the risers twisted to meet the gallery which opened over shining banisters into the foyer below.

Cathedral ceilings, he thought. The legacy of Fenton the cockroach. And with a twist like steel in his guts, the memory of that nasty internal voice came back to him. Not his voice. The voice of the cockroach:

This is how it will be when she's dead.

And then the bedroom. The sheets, and Sara's smell upon them. The long fall into oblivion.

HE WOKE abruptly, clawing away a web of nightmare. He had been trapped in suffocating dark, while something —
— *the cockroach* —
— gnawed hungrily at his guts.

He sat up, breathing hard.

Sara stood at the foot of the bed, his shoes dangling in her upraised hand. She said, "You son of a bitch."

Gerald squinted at the clock-radio. Dull red numbers transformed themselves as he watched. 11:03. Sunlight lashed through the blinds. The room swam with the stink of sleep and alcohol.

"Sara..." He dug at his eyes.

"You son of a bitch," she said.

She flung the shoes hard into his stomach as, gasping, he stumbled from the bed. "Sara — "

But she had turned away. He glimpsed her in profile at the door, her stomach slightly domed beneath her drop-waist dress, and then she was gone.

Gerald, swallowing — how dry his throat was! — followed. He caught her at the steps, and took her elbow.

"Sara, it was only a few drinks. Lake and I — "

She turned on him, a fierce light in her eyes. Her fury propelled him back a step. She reminded him of a feral dog, driving an intruder from her pups.

"It's not that, Gerald," she said.

And then —

— *goddamn it, I won't be treated like that!* —

— he stepped toward her, clasping her elbows. Wrenching her arm loose, she drew back her hand. The slap took them both by surprise; he could see the shock of it in her eyes, softening the anger.

His anger, too, dissipated, subsumed in a rising tide of grief and memory.

An uneasy stillness descended. She exhaled and turned away, stared over the railing into the void below, where the sun fell in bright patches against the parquet. Gerald lifted a hand to his cheek, and Sara turned now to face him, her eyes lifted to him, her hand following his to his face. He felt her touch him through the burning.

"I'm sorry," they said simultaneously.

Bright sheepish laughter at this synchronicity convulsed them, and Gerald, embracing her, saw with horror how close she stood to the stairs. Unbidden, an image possessed him: Sara, teetering on the edge of balance. In a series of strobic flashes, he saw it as it might have been. Saw her fall away from him, her arms outstretched for his grasping fingers. Saw her crash backwards to the landing, tumble down the long flight to the foyer. Saw the blood —

— *so little blood. My God, who would have thought! So little blood!*

"I'm sorry," he said again.

She dug her fingers into his back. "It's not that."

"Then what?"

She pulled away and fixed him with her stare. "Your shoes, Gerald. You left them on the stairs." Her hand stole over the tiny mound of her stomach. "I could have fallen."

"I'm sorry," he said, and drew her to him.

Her voice tight with controlled emotion, she spoke again, barely perceptible, punctuating her words with small blows against his shoulder. "Not again," she whispered.

Clasping her even tighter, Gerald drew in a faint breath of her floral-scented shampoo and gazed over her head at the stairs which fell infinitely away behind her.

"Not again," he said.

Gerald watched apprehensively as Dr. Exavious dragged the ultrasound transducer over Sara's belly, round as a small pumpkin and glisten-

ing with clear, odorless gel. The small screen flickered with a shifting pattern of gray and black, grainy and irresolute as the swirling path of a thunderstorm on a television meteorologist's radar.

Sara looked on with a clear light in her face. It was an expression Gerald saw with increasing frequency these days. A sort of tranquil beauty had come into her features, a still internal repose not unlike that he sometimes glimpsed when she moved over him in private rhythm, outward token of a concentration even then wholly private and remote.

But never, never so lost to him as now.

"There now," Exavious said softly. He pointed at the screen. "There is the heart, do you see it?"

Gerald leaned forward, staring. The room, cool, faintly redolent of antiseptic, was silent but for Sara's small coos of delight, and the muted whirl of the VCR racked below the ultrasound scanner. Gerald drew a slow breath as the grayish knot Exavious had indicated drew in upon itself and expanded in a pulse of ceaseless, mindless syncopation.

"Good strong heart," Exavious said.

Slowly then, he began to move the transducer again. A feeling of unreality possessed Gerald as he watched the structure of his child unfold across the screen in changeable swaths of light. Here the kidneys — "Good, very good," Exavious commented — and there the spine, knotted, serpentine. The budding arms and legs — Exavious pausing here to trace lambent measurements on the screen with a wand, nodding to himself. And something else, which Exavious didn't comment on, but which Gerald thought to be the hint of a vestigial tail curling between the crooked lines of the legs. He had heard of children born with tails, anomalous throwbacks from the long evolutionary rise out of the jungle.

Sara said, "Can you get an image of the whole baby?"

Exavious adjusted the transducer once more. The screen flickered, settled, grew still at the touch of a button. "Not the whole baby. The beam is too narrow, but this is close."

Gerald studied the image, the thing hunched upon itself in a swirl of viscous fluid, spine twisted, misshapen head fractured by atavistic features: blind pits he took for eyes, black slits for nostrils, the thin slash of the mouth, like a snake's mouth, as lipless and implacable. He saw at the end of an out-flung limb the curled talon of a hand. Gerald could not quell

the feeling of revulsion which welled up inside him. It looked not like a child, he thought, but like some primitive reptile, a throwback to the numb, idiot fecundity of the primordial slime.

He and Sara spoke at the same time:

"It's beautiful."

"My God, it doesn't even look human."

He said this without thought, and only in the shocked silence that followed did he see how it must have sounded.

"I mean — " he said, but it was pointless. Sara would not meet his eyes.

Dr. Exavious said, "In fact, you are both correct. It is beautiful indeed, but it hardly looks human. Not yet. It will, though." He patted Sara's hand. "Mr. Hartshorn's reaction is not atypical."

"But not typical either, I'm guessing."

Exavious shrugged. "Perhaps." He touched a button and the image on the screen disappeared. He cleaned and racked the transducer, halted the VCR.

"I was just thinking it looks...like something very ancient," Gerald said. "Evolution, you know."

"Haeckel's law. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny."

"I'm sorry?"

"A very old idea, Mr. Hartshorn. The development of the individual recapitulates the development of the species."

"Is that true?" Sara asked.

"Not literally. In some metaphorical sense, I suppose." Bending, the doctor ejected the tape from the VCR and handed it to Gerald. "But let me assure you, your baby is fine. It is going to be a beautiful child."

At this, Gerald caught Sara's eye: I'm sorry, this look was meant to say, but she would not yield. Later though, in the car, she forgave him, saying: "Did you hear what he said, Gerald? A beautiful child." She laughed and squeezed his hand and said it again: "Our beautiful, beautiful baby."

Gerald forced a smile. "That's right," he told her.

But in his heart another voice was speaking, a thin ugly voice he knew. *Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny*, it said, and Gerald gripped the steering wheel until the flesh at his knuckles went bloodless; he smiled

at Sara, and tried to wall that voice away, and perhaps he thought he succeeded. But in the secret chambers of his heart it resonated still. And he could not help but listen.

Three weeks later, Indian summer began to die away into fall, and Sara reported that the baby had begun moving within her. Time and again over the next few weeks, Gerald cupped his hand over the growing mound of her belly, alert to even the tiniest shift, but he could feel nothing, nothing at all.

"There," Sara said. Breathlessly: "Can you feel it?"

Gerald shook his head, feeling, for no reason he could quite articulate, vaguely relieved.

Sara continued to put on weight, complaining gamely as her abdomen expanded and her breasts grew sensitive. Gerald sometimes came upon her unawares in the bedroom, standing in her robe and gazing ruefully at the mirror, or sitting on the bed, staring thoughtfully into a closet crowded with unworn clothes and shoes that cramped her swollen feet. A thin dark line extended to her navel (the rectus muscle, Exavious told them, never fear); she claimed she could do nothing with her hair. At night, waking beside her in the darkness, Gerald found his hands stealing over her in numb bewilderment. What had happened to Sara, long known, much loved? The clean, angular lines he had known for years vanished, her long bones hidden in this figure gently rounded and soft. Who was this strange woman sleeping in his bed?

And yet, despite all, her beauty seemed to Gerald only more pronounced. She moved easy in this new body, at home and graceful. That clear light he had glimpsed sporadically in her face gradually grew brighter, omnipresent, radiating out of her with a chill calm. For the first time in his life, Gerald believed that old description he had so often read: Sara's eyes indeed *did* sparkle. They danced, they *shone* with a brilliance that reflected his stare — hermetic, enigmatic, defying interpretation. Her gaze pierced through him, into a world or future he could not see or share. Her hands seemed unconsciously to be drawn to her swollen belly; they crept over it constantly, they caressed it.

Her gums swelled. She complained of heartburn, but she would not use the antacid tablets Exavious prescribed, would not touch aspirin or

ibuprofen. In October, she could no longer sleep eight hours undisturbed. Once, twice, three times a night, Gerald woke to feel the mattress relinquish her weight with a long sigh. He listened as she moved through the heavy dark to the bathroom, no lights, ever considerate. He listened to the secret flow of urine, the flushing toilet's throaty rush. He woke up, sore-eyed, yawning, and Dr. Exavious's words — *there are many pressures, you understand, not least on the kidneys* — began to seem less like a joke, more like a curse.

In November, they began attending the childbirth classes the doctor had recommended. Twice a week, on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, Gerald crept out of the office early, uncomfortably aware of Julian MacGregor's baleful gaze; at such moments, he could not help but think of Lake Conley and the Heather Drug campaign. As he retrieved the Lexus from the garage under the building and drove to the rambling old Baptist church where the classes met, his thoughts turned to his exhaustion-stitched eyes and his increasingly tardy appearances at the office every morning. Uneasy snakes of anxiety coiled through his guts.

One afternoon, he sneaked away half an hour early and stopped by the bar on Magnolia for two quick drinks. Calmer then, he drove to the church and parked, letting himself in through the side door of the classroom a few minutes early. Pregnant women thronged the room, luminous and beautiful and infinitely remote; those few men like himself already present stood removed, on the fringes, banished from this mysterious communion.

For a long terrible moment, he stood in the doorway and searched for Sara, nowhere visible. Just the room crowded with these women, their bellies stirring with a biological imperative neither he nor any man could know or comprehend, that same strange light shining in their inscrutable eyes. *They are in league against us*, whispered a voice unbidden in his mind. *They are in league against us*.

Was that the cockroach's voice? Or was it his own?

Then the crowd shifted, Sara slipped into sight. She came toward him, smiling, and he stepped forward to meet her, this question unresolved.

But the incident — and the question it inspired — lingered in his mind. When he woke from restless dreams, it attended him, nagging, resonant: that intimate communion of women he had seen, linked by

fleshly sympathies he could not hope to understand. Their eyes shining with a passion that surpassed any passion he had known. The way they had — that Sara had — of cradling their swollen bellies, as if to caress the —

— *Christ, was it monstrous what came to mind!* —

— growths within.

He sat up sweating, sheets pooled in his lap. Far down in the depths of the house the furnace kicked on; overheated air, smelling musty and dry, wafted by his face. Winter folded the house in chill intimacy, but in here...hot, hot. His heart pounded. He wiped a hand over his forehead, dragged in a long breath.

Some watchful quality to the silence, the uneven note of her respiration, told him that Sara, too, was awake. In the darkness. Thinking.

She said, "You okay?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know."

And this was sufficient for her. She asked nothing more of him than this simple admission of weakness, she never had. She touched him now, her long hand cool against his back. She drew him to the softness at her breast, where he rested his head now, breath ragged, a panic he could not contain rising like wind in the desert places inside him. Heavy dry sobs wracked him.

"Shhh, now," she said, not asking, just rocking him gently. Her hands moved through his hair.

"Shhh," she whispered.

And slowly, by degrees imperceptible, the agony that had possessed him, she soothed away. Nothing, he thought. Of course, it had been nothing — anxieties, Lake Conley had said.

"You okay?" she asked again.

"I'm fine."

She pulled him closer. His hand came to her thigh, and without conscious intention, he found himself opening her gown, kissing her, her breasts, fuller now than he had ever known them. Her back arched. Her fingers were in his hair.

She whispered, "Gerald, that feels nice."

He continued to kiss her, his interest rising. The room was dark, but he could see her very clearly in his mind: the Sara he had known, lithe and supple; this new Sara, this strange woman who shared his bed, her beauty

rising out of some deep reservoir of calm and peace. He traced the slope of her breasts and belly. Here. And here. He guided her, rolling her to her side, her back to him, rump out-thrust as Exavious had recommended during a particularly awkward and unforgettable consultation —

"No, Gerald," she said. She said, "No."

Gerald paused, breathing heavily. Below, in the depths of the darkened house, the furnace shut off, and into the immense silence that followed, he said, "Sara — "

"No," she said. "No, no."

Gerald rolled over on his back. He tried to throttle back the frustration rising once more within him, not gone after all, not dissipated, merely...pushed away.

Sara turned to him, she came against him. He could feel the bulk of her belly interposed between them.

"I'm afraid, Gerald. I'm afraid it'll hurt the baby."

Her fingers were on his thigh.

"It won't hurt the baby. Exavious said it won't hurt the baby. The books said it won't hurt the baby. Everyone says it won't hurt the baby."

Her voice in the darkness: "But what if it does? I'm afraid, Gerald."

Gerald took a deep breath. He forced himself to speak calmly. "Sara, it won't hurt the baby. Please."

She kissed him, her breath hot in his ear. Her fingers worked at him. She whispered, "See? We can do something else." Pleading now. "We can be close, I want that."

But Gerald, the anger and frustration boiling out of him in a way he didn't like, a way he couldn't control — it scared him — threw back the covers. Stood, and reached for his robe, thinking: *Hot. It's too hot. I've got to get out of here.* But he could not contain himself. He paused, fingers shaking as he belted the robe, to fling back these words: "I'm not so sure I want to be close, Sara. I'm not at all sure *what* I want anymore."

And then, in three quick strides, he was out the door and into the hall, hearing the words she cried after him — "Gerald, *please*" — but not pausing to listen.

The flagstone floor in the den, chill against his bare feet, cooled him. Standing behind the bar in the airy many-windowed room, he mixed

himself a gin and tonic with more gin than tonic and savored the almost physical sense of heat, real and emotional, draining along his tension-knotted spine, through the tight muscles of his legs and feet, into the placid stones beneath.

He took a calming swallow of gin and touched the remote on the bar. The television blared to life in a far corner and he cycled through the channels as he finished his drink. Disjointed, half-glimpsed images flooded the darkened room: thuggish young men entranced by the sinister beat of the city, tanks jolting over desert landscape, the gang at Cheers laughing it up at Cliff's expense. Poor Cliff. You weren't supposed to identify with him, but Gerald couldn't help it. Poor Cliff was just muddling through like anyone —

— *Like you*, whispered that nasty voice, the voice he could not help but think of as the cockroach.

Gerald shuddered.

On principle, he hated the remote — the worst thing ever to happen to advertising — but now he fingered it again, moved past Letterman's arrogant smirk. He fished more ice from the freezer, splashed clean-smelling gin in his glass, chased it with tonic. Then, half-empty bottle of liquor and a jug of tonic clutched in one hand, drink and television remote in the other, Gerald crossed the room and lowered himself into the recliner.

His anger had evaporated — quick to come, quick to go, it always had been — but an uneasy tension lingered in its wake. He should go upstairs, apologize — he owed it to Sara — but he could not bring himself to move. A terrific inertia shackled him. He had no desire except to drink gin and thumb through the channels, pausing now and again when something caught his eye, half-clad dancers on MTV, a news story about the unknown cannibal killer in LA, once the tail-end of a commercial featuring none other than Fenton the giant cockroach himself.

Christ.

Three or four drinks thereafter he must have dozed, for he came to himself suddenly and unpleasantly when a nightmare jolted him awake. He sat up abruptly, his empty glass crashing to the floor. He had a blurred impression of it as it shattered, sending sharp scintillas of brilliance

skating across the flagstones as he doubled over, sharp ghosts of pain shooting through him, as something, Christ —

— *the cockroach* —

— gnawed ravenously at his swollen guts.

He gasped, head reeling with gin. The house brooded over him. Then he felt nothing, the dream pain gone, and when, with reluctant horror, he lifted his clutching hands from his belly, he saw only pale skin between the loosely belted flaps of robe, not the gory mess he had irrationally expected, not the blood —

— *so little blood, who would have thought! So little blood and such a little* —

No. He wouldn't think of that now, he wouldn't think of that at all.

He touched the lever on the recliner, lifting his feet, and reached for the bottle of gin beside the chair. He gazed at the shattered glass and then studied the finger or two of liquor remaining in the bottle; after a moment, he spun loose the cap and tilted the bottle to his lips. Gasoline-harsh gin flooded his mouth. Drunk now, dead drunk, he could feel it and he didn't care, Gerald stared at the television.

A nature program flickered by, the camera closing on a brown grasshopper making its way through lush undergrowth. He sipped at the gin, searched densely for the remote. Must have slipped into the cushions. He felt around for it, but it became too much of an effort. Hell with it.

The grasshopper continued to progress in disjointed leaps, the camera tracking expertly, and this alone exerted over him a bizarre fascination. How the hell did they film these things anyway? He had a quick amusing image: a near-sighted entomologist and his cameraman tramping through some benighted wilderness, slapping away insects and suffering the indignities of crotch-rot. Ha-ha. He touched the lever again, dropping the footrest, and placed his bare feet on the cool flagstones, mindful in a meticulously drunken way of the broken glass.

Through a background of exotic bird-calls, and the swish of antediluvian vegetation, a cultured masculine voice began to speak: "Less common than in the insect world, biological mimicry, developed by predators and prey through millennia of natural selection is still..."

Gerald leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees. A faraway voice whispered in his mind. Natural selection. Sophomore biology had

been long ago, but he recognized the term as an element of evolutionary theory. What had Exavious said?

That nasty voice whispering away...

He had a brief flash of the ultrasound video, which Sara had watched again only that evening: the fetus, reptilian, primitive, an eerie wakeful quality to its amniotic slumber.

On the screen, the grasshopper took another leap. Music came up on the soundtrack, slow, minatory, almost subliminal. "...less commonly used by predators," the voiceover said, "biological mimicry can be dramatically effective when it is..." The grasshopper took another leap and plummeted toward a clump of yellow and white flowers. Too fast for Gerald really to see, the flowers exploded into motion. He sat abruptly upright, his heart racing, as prehensile claws flashed out, grasped the stunned insect, and dragged it down. "Take the orchid mantis of the Malaysian rainforest," the voiceover continued. "Evolution has disguised few predators so completely. Watch again as..." And now the image began to replay, this time in slow motion, so that Gerald could see in agonizing detail the grasshopper's slow descent, the flower-colored mantis unfolding with deadly and inevitable grace from the heart of the blossom, grasping claws extended. Again. And again. Each time the camera moved in tighter, tighter, until the mantis seemed to fill the screen with an urgency dreadful and inexorable and wholly merciless.

Gerald grasped the bottle of gin and sat back as the narrator continued, speaking now of aphid-farming ants and the lacewing larva. But he had ceased to listen. He tilted the bottle to his lips, thinking again of that reptilian fetus, awash in the womb of the woman he loved and did not want to lose. And now that faraway voice in his mind sounded closer, more distinct. It was the voice of the cockroach, but the words it spoke were those of Dr. Exavious.

Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.

Gerald took a last pull of the bottle of gin. Now what exactly did that mean?

The ball whizzed past in a blur as Gerald stepped up to meet it, his racquet sweeping around too late. He spun and lunged past Lake Conley

to catch the ricochet off the back wall, but the ball slipped past, bouncing twice, and slowed to a momentum draining roll.

"Goddamn it!" Gerald flung his racquet hard after the ball and collapsed against the back wall. He drew up his legs and draped his forearms over his knees.

"Game," Lake said.

"Go to hell." Gerald closed his eyes, tilted his head against the wall and tried to catch his breath. He could smell his own sweat, tinged with the sour odor of gin. He didn't open his eyes when Lake slid down beside him.

"Kind of an excessive reaction even for you," Lake said.

"Stress."

"Work?"

"That, too." Gerald gazed at Lake through slitted eyes. "Ahh."

They sat quietly, listening to a distant radio blare from the weight-room. From adjoining courts, the squeak of rubber-soled shoes and the intermittent smack of balls came to them, barely audible. Gerald watched, exhaustion settling over him like a gray blanket, while Lake traced invisible patterns on the floor with the edge of his racquet.

"Least I don't have to worry about the Heather Drug campaign," Gerald said. Almost immediately, he wished he could pull the words back. Unsay them.

For a long time, Lake didn't answer. When he did, he said only, "You have a right to be pissed off about that."

"Not really. Long time since I put a decent campaign together. Julian knows what he's doing."

Lake shrugged.

Again, Gerald tilted his head against the wall, closing his eyes. There it was, there it always was anymore, that image swimming in his internal darkness: the baby, blind and primitive and preternaturally aware. He saw it in his dreams; sometimes when he woke he had vague memories of a red fury clawing free of his guts. And sometimes it wasn't this dream he remembered, but another: looking on, helpless, horrified, while something terrible exploded out of Sara's smoothly rounded belly.

That one was worse.

That one spoke with the voice of the cockroach. That one said: *You're going to lose her.*

Lake was saying, "Not to put too fine a point on it, Gerald, but you look like hell. You come to work smelling like booze half the time, I don't know what you expect."

Expect? What did he expect exactly? And what would Lake say if he told him?

Instead, he said, "I'm not sleeping much. Sara doesn't sleep well. She gets up two, three times a night."

"So you're just sucking down a few drinks so you can sleep at night, that right?"

Gerald didn't answer.

"What's up with you anyway, Gerald?"

Gerald stared into the darkness behind his closed eyes, the world around him wheeling and vertiginous. He flattened his palms against the cool wooden floor, seeking a tangible link to the world he had known before, the world he had known and lost, he did not know where or how. Seeking to anchor himself to an earth that seemed to be sliding away beneath him. Seeking solace.

"Gerald?"

In his mind, he saw the mantis orchid; on the screen of his eyelids, he watched it unfold with deadly grace and drag down the hapless grasshopper.

He said: "I watch the sonogram tape, you know? I watch it at night when Sara's sleeping. It doesn't look like a baby, Lake. It doesn't look like anything human at all. And I think I'm going to lose her. I think I'm going to lose her, it's killing her, it's some kind of...something...I don't know...it's going to take her away."

"Gerald — "

"No. Listen. When I first met Sara, I remember the thing I liked about her — one of the things I liked about her anyway, I liked so much about her, everything — but the thing I remember most was this day when I first met her family. I went home with her from school for a week-end and her whole family — her little sister, her mom, her dad — they were all waiting. They had prepared this elaborate meal and we ate in the dining room, and you knew that they were a family. It was just this quality they had, and it didn't mean they even liked each other all the time, but they were there for each other. You could feel it, you could breathe it in, like oxygen.

That's what I wanted. That's what we have together, that's what I'm afraid of losing. I'm afraid of losing her."

He was afraid to open his eyes. He could feel tears there. He was afraid to look at Lake, to share his weakness, which he had never shared with anyone but Sara.

Lake said, "But don't you see, the baby will just draw you closer. Make you even more of a family than you ever were. You're afraid, Gerald, but it's just normal anxiety."

"I don't think so."

"The sonogram?" Lake said. "Your crazy thoughts about the sonogram? Everybody thinks that. But everything changes when the baby comes, Gerald. Everything."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Gerald said.



AFTER THE GYM, Gerald drove for hours without conscious purpose, trusting mindless reflexes to take him where they would. Around him sprawled the city, senseless, stunned like a patient on a table, etherized by winter.

By the time he pulled the Lexus to the broken curb in a residential neighborhood that had been poor two decades past, a few flakes of snow had begun to swirl through the expanding cones of his headlights. Dusk fell out of the December sky. Gerald cracked his window, inhaled cold smoke-stained air, and gazed diagonally across the abandoned street.

Still there. My God, still there after these ten years. A thought recurred to him, an image he had not thought of in all the long months — ages, they felt like — since that first visit to Dr. Exavious: like stepping into icy water, this stepping into the past.

No one lived there anymore. He could see that from the dilapidated state of the house, yard gone to seed, windows broken, paint that had been robin's egg blue a decade ago weathered now to the dingy shade of mop water. Out front, the wind creaked a realtor's sign long since scabbed over with rust. The skeletal swing-set remained in the barren yard, and it occurred to him now that his child — his and Sara's child — might have played there if only...

If only.

Always and forever if only.

The sidewalk, broken and weedy, still wound lazily from the street. The concrete stoop still extruded from the front door like a grotesquely foreshortened tongue. Three stairs still mounted to the door, the railing — Dear God — shattered and dragged away years since.

So short. Three short stairs. So little blood. Who could have known?

He thought of the gym, Lake Conley, the story he had wanted to tell but had not. He had not told anyone. And why should he? No great trauma, there; no abuse or hatred, no fodder for the morning talk shows; just the subtle cruelties, the little twists of steel that made up life.

But always there somehow. Never forgotten. Memories not of this house, though this house had its share God knows, but of a house very much like this one, in a neighborhood pretty much the same, in another city, in another state, a hundred years in the past or so it seemed. Another lifetime.

But unforgettable all the same.

Gerald had never known his father, had never seen him except in a single photograph: a merchant mariner, broad-shouldered and handsome, his wind-burned face creased by a broad incongruous smile. Gerald had been born in a different age, before such children became common, in a different world where little boys without fathers were never allowed to forget their absences and loss. His mother, he supposed, had been a good woman in her way — had tried, he knew, and now, looking back with the discerning eye of an adult, he could see how it must have been for her: the thousand slights she had endured, the cruelties visited upon a small-town girl and the bastard son she had gotten in what her innocence mistook for love. Yes. He understood her flight to the city and its anonymity; he understood the countless lovers; now, at last, he understood the drinking when it began in earnest, when her looks had begun to go. Now he saw what she had been seeking. Solace. Only solace.

But forgive?

Now, sitting in his car across the street from the house where his first child had been miscarried, where he had almost lost forever the one woman who had thought him worthy of her love, Gerald remembered.

The little twists of steel, spoken without thought or heat, that made up life.

How old had he been then? Twelve? Thirteen?

Old enough to know, anyway. Old enough to creep into the living room and crouch over his mother as she lay there sobbing, drunken, bruised, a cold wind blowing through the open house where the man, whoever he had been, had left the door to swing open on its hinges after he had beaten her. Old enough to scream into his mother's whiskey-shattered face: *I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!*

Old enough to remember her reply: *If it wasn't for you, you little bastard, he never would have left. If it wasn't for you, he never would have left me.*

Old enough to remember, sure.

But old enough to forgive? Not then, Gerald knew. Not now. And maybe never.

THEY DID NOT GO to bed together. Sara came to him in the den, where he sat in the recliner, drinking gin and numbly watching television. He saw her in the doorway that framed the formal living room they never used, and beyond that, in diminishing perspective, the broad open foyer: but Sara foremost, foregrounded and unavoidable.

She said, "I'm going to bed. Are you coming?"

"I thought I'd stay up for a bit."

She crossed the flagstone floor to him in stocking feet, soundlessly, like a grotesquely misshapen apparition — her belly preceding her. He wondered if the long lines of the body he used to know were in there somewhere. She was still beautiful, still graceful, to be sure. But she possessed now a grace and beauty unlike any he had known, ponderous and alien, wholly different from that she had possessed the first time he had seen her all those years ago — ghost-like then as well, an apparition from a world stable and dependable, a world of family, glimpsed in heart-wrenching profile through the clamorous throng of the University Center cafeteria.

She knelt by him. "Please come to bed."

He swished his drink. Ice bobbed and clinked. "I need to unwind."

"Gerald..."

"No really, I'm not sleepy, okay?" He smiled, and he could feel the falseness of the smile, but it satisfied her.

She leaned toward him, her lips brushed his cheek with a pressure barely present — the merest papery rush of moth wings in a darkened room. And then she was gone.

Gerald drank: stared into the television's poison glow and drank gin and tonic, nectar and ambrosia. *Tastes like a Christmas tree*, Sara had told him the first night they were together, really together. He had loved her, he thought. He touched the remote, cycled past a fragmentary highlight of an NFL football game; past the dependable hysteria over the LA cannibal killer, identity unknown; past the long face of Mr. Ed. Drank gin and cycled through and through the channels, fragmentary windows on a broken world. Oh, he had loved her.

Later, how much later he didn't know and didn't care, Gerald found his way to the bedroom. Without undressing, he lay supine on the bed and stared sightlessly at the ceiling, Sara beside him, sleeping the hard sleep of exhaustion for now, though Gerald knew it would not last. Before the night was out, the relentless demands of the child within her would prod her into wakefulness. Lying there, his eyes gradually adjusting to the dark until the features of the room appeared to stand out, blacker still against the blackness, something, some whim, some impulse he could not contain, compelled him to steal his hand beneath the covers: stealthy now, through the folds of the sheet; past the hem of her gown, rucked up below her breasts; at last flattening his palm along the arc of her distended belly. Sara took in a heavy breath, kicked at the covers restlessly, subsided.

Silence all through the house, even the furnace silent in its basement lair: just Sara's steady respiration, and Gerald with her in the weighty dark, daring hardly to breathe, aware now of a cold sobriety in the pressure of the air.

The child moved.

For the first time, he felt it. He felt it move. An icy needle of emotion pierced him. It moved, moved again, the faintest shift in its embryonic slumber, bare adjustment of some internal gravity.

Just a month, he thought. *Only a month*.

The child moved, *really* moved now, palpable against his outstretched palm. Gerald threw back the covers, sitting upright, the room wheeling about him so swiftly that he had to swallow hard against an obstruction

rising in his throat. Sara kicked in her sleep, and then was still.

Gerald looked down at her, supine, one long hand curled at her chin, eyes closed, mouth parted, great mound of belly half-visible below the hem of her up-turned gown. Now again, slowly, he laid a hand against her warm stomach, and yes, just as he had feared, it happened again: the baby moved, a long slow pressure against his palm.

Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, hissed the thin nasty voice of the cockroach. But what exactly did that mean?

He moved his palm along her taut belly, pausing as Sara sighed in her sleep, and here too, like the slow pressure of some creature of the unknown deep, boiling through the placid waters, came that patient and insistent pressure. And then something more, not mere pressure, not gentle: a sudden, powerful blow. Sara moaned and arched her back, but the blow came again, as though the creature within her had hurled itself against the wall of the imprisoning womb. *Why didn't she wake up?* Gerald drew his hand away. Blow wasn't really the right word, was it?

What was?

His heart hammered at his ribcage; transfixed, Gerald moved his hand back toward Sara's belly. No longer daring to touch her, he skated his hand over the long curve on an inch-thin cushion of air. My God, he thought. My God. For he could see it now, he could *see* it: an outward bulge of the taut flesh with each repeated blow, as though a fist had punched her from within. He moved his hand, paused, and it happened again, sudden and sure, an outward protrusion that swelled and sank and swelled again. In a kind of panic —

— *what the hell was going on here* —

— Gerald moved his hand, paused, moved it again, tracing the curve of Sara's belly in a series of jerks and starts. And it *followed* him. Even though he was no longer touching her, it followed him, that sudden outward protrusion, the thing within somehow aware of his presence and trying to get at him. The blows quickened even as he watched, until they began to appear and disappear with savage, violent speed.

And still she did not wake up.

Not a blow, he thought. A strike.

Like the swift, certain strike of a cobra. An image unfolded with deadly urgency in Gerald's mind: the image of the orchid-colored mantis

exploding outward from its flowery hole to drag down the helpless grasshopper and devour it.

Gerald jerked his hand away as if stung.

Sara's abdomen was still and pale as a tract of mountain snow. Nothing moved there. He reached the covers across her and lay back. A terrific weight settled over him; his chest constricted with panic; he could barely draw breath.

The terrible logic of the thing revealed itself to him at last. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, Exavious had told him. And what if it was true? What if each child reflected in its own development the evolutionary history of the entire species?

Imagine:

Somewhere, far far back in the evolutionary past — who could say how far? — but somewhere, it began. A mutation that should have died, but didn't, a creature born of man and woman that survived to feed...and reproduce. Imagine a recessive gene so rare that it appeared in only one of every ten thousand individuals — one of every hundred thousand even. For that would be sufficient, wouldn't it? Gerald couldn't calculate the odds, but he knew that it would be sufficient, that occasionally, three or four times in a generation, two carriers of such a gene would come together and produce... What? A child that was not what it appeared to be. A child that was not human. A monster clothed in human flesh.

Beside him, Sara moaned in her sleep. Gerald did not move.

He shut his eyes and saw against the dark screens of his eyelids, the flower-colored mantis, hidden in its perfumed lair; saw its deadly graceful assault, its pincers as they closed around the helpless grasshopper and dragged it down. The words of the narrator came back to him as well: natural selection favors the most efficient predator. And the most efficient predator is the monster that walks unseen among its chosen prey.

Terror gripped him as at last he understood how it must have been through all the long span of human history: Jack the Ripper, the Zodiac, the cannibal killer loose even now in the diseased bowels of Los Angeles.

We are hunted, he thought. We are hunted.

He stumbled clumsily from the bed and made his way into the adjoining bathroom, where for a long time he knelt over the toilet and was violently, violently sick.

Sanity returned to him in perceptual shards: watery light through the slatted blinds, the mattress rolling under him like a ship in rough waters, a jagged sob of fear and pain that pierced him through. Sara.

Gerald sat upright, swallowing bile. He took in the room with a wild glance.

Sara: in the doorway to the bathroom, long legs twisted beneath her, hands clutched in agony at her bloated abdomen. And blood —

— *my God, how could you have* —

— so much blood, a crimson gout against the pale carpet, a pool spreading over the tiled floor of the bathroom.

Gerald reached for the phone, dialed 911. And then he went to her, took her in his arms, comforted her.

S WARMING MASSES of interns and nurses in white smocks swept her away from him at the hospital. Later, during the long gray hours in the waiting room — hours spent staring at the mindless flicker of television or gazing through dirty windows that commanded a view of the parking lot, cup after cup of sour vending machine coffee clutched in hands that would not warm — Gerald could not recall how they had spirited her away. In his last clear memory he saw himself step out of the ambulance into an icy blood-washed dawn, walking fast beside the gurney, Sara's cold hand clutched in his as the automatic doors slipped open on the chill impersonal reaches of the emergency room.

Somehow he had been shunted aside, diverted without the solace of a last endearment, without even a backward glance. Instead he found himself wrestling with a severe gray-headed woman about insurance policies and admission requirements, a kind of low-wattage bureaucratic hell he hated every minute of, but missed immediately when it ended and left him to his thoughts.

Occasionally he gazed at the pay phones along the far wall, knowing he should call Sara's mother but somehow unable to gather sufficient strength to do so. Later, he glimpsed Exavious in an adjacent corridor, but the doctor barely broke stride. He merely cast at Gerald a speculative glance —

— *he knows, he knows* —

— and passed on, uttering over his shoulder these words in his obscurely accented English: "We are doing everything in our power, Mr. Hartshorn. I will let you know as soon as I have news."

Alone again. Alone with bitter coffee, recriminations, the voice of the cockroach.

An hour passed. At eleven o'clock, Exavious returned. "It is not good, I'm afraid," he said. "We need to perform a caesarean section, risky under the circumstances, but we have little choice if the baby is to survive."

"And Sara?"

"We cannot know, Mr. Hartshorn." Exavious licked his lips, met Gerald's gaze. "Guarded optimism, shall we say. The fall..." He lifted his hand. "Your wife is feverish, irrational. We need you to sign some forms."

And afterward, after the forms were signed, he fixed Gerald for a long moment with that same speculative stare and then he turned away. "I'll be in touch."

Gerald glared at the clock as if he could by force of will speed time's passage. At last he stood, crossed once more to the vending machines, and for the first time in seven years purchased a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. After a word with the receptionist, he stepped into the bitterly cold December morning to smoke.

A few flakes of snow had begun to drift aimlessly about in the wind. Gerald stood under the E.R. awning, beneath the bruised and sullen sky, the familiar stink of cigarette smoke somehow comforting in his nostrils. He gazed out over the crowded parking lot, his eyes watering. Like stepping into icy water, he thought, this stepping into the past: for what he saw was not the endless rows of cars, but the house he had visited for the first time in a decade only a day ago. And the voice he heard in his head was neither the voice of the hospital p.a. system nor the voice of the wind. It was the voice of the cockroach, saying words he did not want to hear.

You, the cockroach told him. You are responsible.

Gerald flipped his cigarette, still burning, into the gutter and wrapped his arms close about his shoulders. But the cold he felt was colder than mere weather.

Responsible.

He supposed he had been. Even now, he could not forget the isolation they had endured during the first years of their marriage. The fear. It hadn't been easy for either of them — not for Gerald, sharing for the first time the bitter legacy of a life he had still to come to terms with; not for Sara, smiling patrician Sara, banished from a family who would not accept the impoverished marriage she had made. To this day Gerald had not forgiven his in-laws for the wedding: the thin-lipped grimace that passed for his mother-in-law's smile; the encounter with his father-in-law in the spotless rest room of the Marriott, when the stout old dentist turned from a urinal to wag a finger in Gerald's face. "Don't ever ask me for a dime, Gerald," he had said. "Sara's made her choice and she'll have to abide by it."

No wonder we were proud, he thought. Sara had taken an evening job as a cashier at a supermarket. Gerald continued at the ad agency, a poorly paid associate, returning nightly to the abandoned rental house where he sat blankly in front of the television and awaited the sound of Sara's key in the lock. God knows they hadn't needed a baby.

But there it was. There it was.

And so the pressure began to tell, the endless pressure to stretch each check just a little further. Gerald could not remember when or why — money he supposed — but gradually the arguments had begun. And he had started drinking. And one night...

One night. Well.

Gerald slipped another cigarette free of the pack and brought it to his lips. Cupping his hands against the wind, he set the cigarette alight, and drew deeply.

One night, she was late from work and, worried, Gerald met her at the door. He stepped out onto the concrete stoop to greet her, his hand curled about the graying wooden rail. When Sara looked up at him, her features taut with worry in the jaundiced corona of the porch light, he had just for a moment glimpsed a vision of himself as she must have seen him: bearish, slovenly, stinking of drink. And poor. Just another poor fucking bastard, only she had married this one.

He opened his arms to her, needing her to deny the truth he had seen reflected in her eyes. But she fended him off, a tight-lipped little moue of distaste crossing her features — he knew that expression, he had seen it on her mother's face.

Her voice was weary when she spoke. Her words stung him like a lash. "Drinking again, Gerald?" And then, as she started to push her way past him: "Christ, sometimes I think Mom was right about you."

And he had struck her.

For the first and only time in all the years they had been married, he had struck her — without thought or even heat, the impulse arising out of some deep poisoned well-spring of his being, regretted even as he lifted his hand.

Sara stumbled. Gerald moved forward to steady her, his heart racing. She fell away from him forever, and in that timeless interval Gerald had a grotesquely heightened sense of his surroundings: the walk, broken and weedy; the dim shadow of a moth battering himself tirelessly against the porch light; in the sky a thousand thousand stars. Abruptly, the world shifted into motion again; in confusion, Gerald watched an almost comically broad expression of relief spread over Sara's face. The railing. The railing had caught her.

"Jesus, Sara, I'm sorr — " he began to say, but a wild gale of hilarity had risen up inside her.

She hadn't begun to realize the consequences of this simple action, Gerald saw. She did not yet see that with a single blow he had altered forever the tenor of their relationship. But the laughter was catching, and he stepped down now, laughing himself, laughing hysterically in a way that was not funny, to soothe away her fears before she saw the damage he had done. Maybe she would never see it.

But just at that moment, the railing snapped with a sound like a gunshot. Sara fell hard, three steps to the ground, breath exploding from her lungs.

But again, she was okay. Just shaken up.

Only later, in the night, would Gerald realize what he had done. Only when the contractions took her would he begin to fear. Only when he tore back the blankets of the bed and saw the blood —

— *so little blood* —

— would he understand.

Gerald snapped away his cigarette in disgust. They had lost the child. Sara, too, had almost died. And yet she had forgiven him. She had forgiven him.

He shivered and looked back through the cold-fogged windows at the waiting room, but he couldn't tolerate the idea of another moment in there. He turned back to the parking lot, exhaled into his cupped hands. He thought of Dr. Exavious, those febrile eyes, the way he had of seeming to gaze into the secret regions of your heart. Probing you. Judging you. Finding you wanting.

There was something else.

Last night.

With this thought, Gerald experienced bleak depths of self-knowledge he had never plumbed before. He saw again the smooth expanse of his wife's belly as he had seen it last night, hideously aswarm with the vicious assaults of the creature within. Now he recognized this vision as a fevered hallucination, nothing more. But last night, last night he had believed. And after his feverish dream, after he had been sick, he had done something else, hadn't he? Something so monstrous and so simple that until this moment he had successfully avoided thinking of it.

He had stood up from the toilet, and there, in the doorway between the bedroom and the bathroom, he had kicked off his shoes, deliberately arranging them heel up on the floor. Knowing she would wake to go to the john two, maybe three times in the night. Knowing she would not turn on the light. Knowing she might fall.

Hoping.

You are responsible.

Oh yes, he thought, you are responsible, my friend. You are guilty.

Just at that moment, Gerald felt a hand on his shoulder. Startled, he turned too fast, feeling the horror rise into his face and announce his guilt to anyone who cared to see. Exavious stood behind him. "Mr. Hartshorn," he said.

Gerald followed the doctor through the waiting room and down a crowded corridor that smelled of ammonia. Exavious did not speak; his lips pressed into a narrow line beneath his mustache. He led Gerald through a set of swinging doors into a cavernous chamber lined with pallets of supplies and soiled linen heaped in laundry baskets. Dusty light-bulbs in metal cages cast a fitful glow over the concrete floor.

"What's going on?" Gerald asked. "How's Sara?"

Exavious did not reply. He stopped by a broad door of corrugated metal that opened on a loading dock, and thumbed the button of the freight elevator.

"One moment, please, Mr. Hartshorn," he said.

They waited silently as the doors slid aside. Exavious gestured Gerald in, and pressed the button for six. With a metallic clunk of gears, they lurched into motion. Gerald stared impassively at the numbers over the door, trying to conceal the panic that had begun to hammer against his ribs. The noisy progress of the elevator seemed almost to speak to him; if he listened closely, he could hear the voice of the cockroach, half-hidden in the rattle of machinery:

She's dead, Gerald. She's dead and you're responsible.

Exavious knew. Gerald could see that clearly now. He wasn't even surprised when Exavious reached out and stopped the lift between the fifth and sixth floors—just sickened, physically sickened by a sour twist of nausea that doubled him over as the elevator ground to a halt with a screech of overtaxed metal. Gerald sagged against the wall as a wave of vertigo passed through him. Sara. Lost. Irrevocably lost. He swallowed hard against the metallic taste in his mouth and closed his eyes.

They hung suspended in the shaft, in the center of an enormous void that seemed to pour in at Gerald's eyes and ears, at every aperture of his body. He drew it in with his breath, he was drowning in it.

Exavious said: "This conversation never occurred, Mr. Hartshorn. I will deny it if you say it did."

Gerald said nothing. He opened his eyes, but he could see only the dull sheen of the elevator car's walls, scarred here and there by careless employees. Only the walls, like the walls of a prison. He saw now that he would not ever really leave this prison he had made for himself. Everything that had ever been important to him he had destroyed—his dignity, his self-respect, his honor and his love. And Sara. Sara most of all.

Exavious said: "I have spoken with Dr. Schwartz. I should have done so sooner." He licked his lips. "When I examined your wife I found no evidence to suggest that she could not carry a child to term. Even late-term miscarriages are not uncommon in first pregnancies. I saw no reason to delve into her history."

He said all this without looking at Gerald. He did not raise his voice or otherwise modify his tone. He stared forward with utter

concentration, his eyes like hard pebbles.

"I should have seen the signs. They were present even in your first office visit. I was looking at your wife, Mr. Hartshorn. I should have been looking at you."

Gerald's voice cracked when he spoke. "Schwartz — what did Schwartz say?"

"Dr. Schwartz was hesitant to say anything at all. He is quite generous: he wished to give you the benefit of the doubt. When pressed, however, he admitted that there had been evidence — a bruise on your wife's face, certain statements she made under anesthesia — that the miscarriage had resulted from an altercation, a physical blow. But you both seemed very sorrowful, so he did not pursue the matter."

Exavious turned to look at Gerald, turned on him the terrific illumination of his gaze, his darkly refulgent eyes exposing everything that Gerald had sought so long to hide. "A woman in your wife's superb physical condition does not often have two late-term miscarriages, Mr. Hartshorn. Yet Mrs. Hartshorn claims that her fall was accidental, that she tripped over a pair of shoes. Needless to say, I do not believe her, though I am powerless to act on my belief. But I had to speak, Mr. Hartshorn — not for you, but for myself."

He punched a button. The elevator jerked into motion once more.

"You are a very lucky man, Mr. Hartshorn. Your wife is awake and doing well. She is recovering from the epidural." He turned once more and fixed Gerald in his gaze. "The baby survived. A boy. You are the father of a healthy baby boy."

The elevator stopped and the doors opened onto a busy floor. "It is more than you deserve."

SARA, THEN.

Sara at last, flat on her back in a private room on the sixth floor. At the sight of her through the wire-reinforced window in the door, Gerald felt a bottomless relief well up within him.

He brushed past Dr. Exavious without speaking. The door opened so silently on its oiled hinges that she did not hear him enter. For a long moment, he stood there in the doorway, just looking at her — allowing the

simple vision of her beauty and her joy to flow through him, to fill up the void that had opened in his heart.

He moved forward, his step a whisper against the tile. Sara turned to look at him. She smiled, lifted a silencing finger to her lips, and then nodded, her eyes returning to her breast and the child that nursed there, wizened and red and patiently sucking.

Just a baby. A child like any other. But different, Gerald knew, different and special in no way he could ever explain, for this child was his own. A feeling like none he had ever experienced — an outpouring of warmth and affection so strong that it was almost frightening — swept over him as he came to the bedside.

Everything Lake Conley had told him was true.

What happened next happened so quickly that Gerald for a moment believed it to be an hallucination. The baby, not yet twelve hours old, pulled away from Sara's breast, pulled away and turned, turned to look at him. For a single terrifying moment Gerald glimpsed not the wrinkled child he had beheld when first he entered the room, but...something else.

Something quicksilver and deadly, rippling with the sleek, purposeful musculature of a predator. A fleeting impression of oily hide possessed him — of a bullet-shaped skull from which glared narrow-pupiled eyes ashine with chill intelligence. Eyes like a snake's eyes, as implacable and smugly knowing.

Mocking me, Gerald thought. Showing itself not because it has to, but because it wants to. Because it can.

And then his old friend the cockroach: *Your child. Yours.*

Gerald extended his hands to Sara. "Can I?" he asked.

And then he drew it to his breast, blood of his blood, flesh of his flesh, this creature that was undeniably and irrevocably his own child.



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CURIOSITIES

THE DIAMOND IN THE WINDOW

BY JANE LANGTON (1962)

I READ this haunting tale of curious children perpetually on the edge of grasping an ineffable mystery early on, and it lodged deeply in my imagination. What I remember most vividly is neither the plot nor the characters but the mood it evoked: Weird, frightening, beautiful.

The novel is cast in a favorite form for children's fantasy: Edward and Eleanor Hall, two children in Concord, Mass. (circa 1962), discover a secret attic room in Uncle Freddy's big old house on Walden Street. The room contains a cryptic poem tantamount to a treasure map, and a variety of antique toys that draw them into an eerie and fantastic otherworld that continually impinges on this one through visions, through dreams, and through encounters bizarre and grotesque. There is a haunted harp, a spectral nautilus shell, an evil jack-in-the-box, a magic mirror, a missing Prince Krishna of Mandracore...and permeating everything, references and reverberations of the Transcendentalists: Emerson, Thoreau, and the

Over-Soul. I managed to forget most of the literary references in the decades since I first read this book, but I have never forgotten the nautilus.

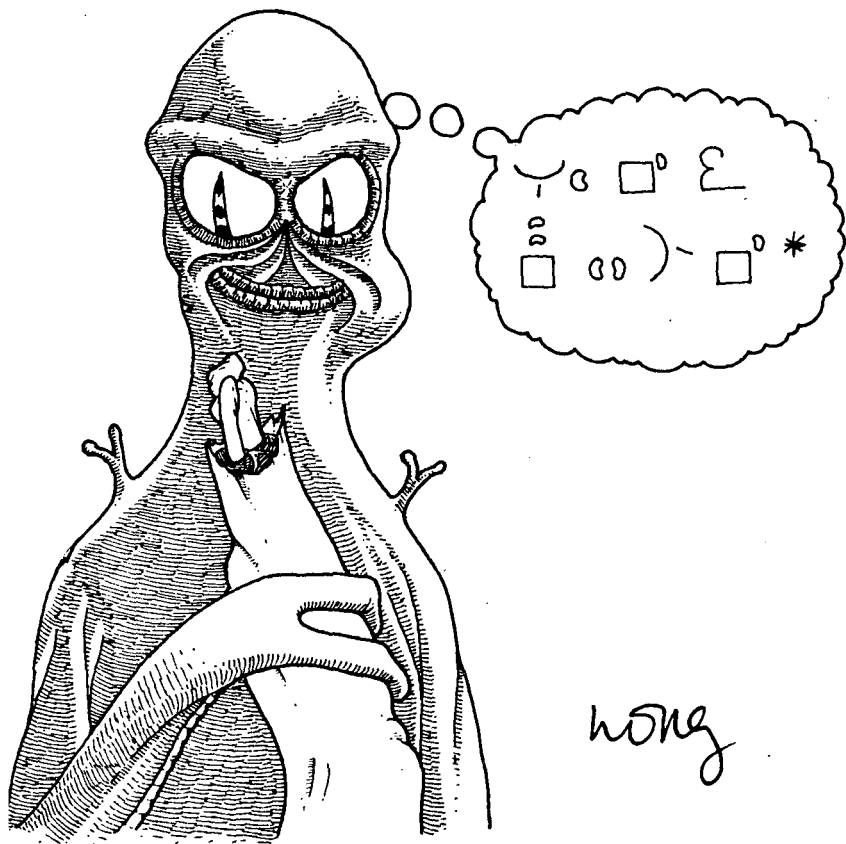
What is marvelous in this book and unforgettable and most stimulating to the imagination, is the persistence of the mystery, an appreciation for strangenesses that can never be explained away. The continuation of Edward and Eleanor's story, entitled *The Swing in the Summerhouse*, was even more ominous and surreal.

Langton has been writing mystery novels for adults in recent years, but it's in the children's section of the library that I always seek her titles. I consider these two books cornerstones in a meaningful children's collection. An online search for *Diamond* at www.amazon.com showed me (along with the welcome news that the book has been reprinted) a dozen readers had come seeking Langton's novel and felt compelled to recommend it. Like me, they placed it high among the unforgettable reading experiences of their youth. ¶

— Marc Laidlaw

SPECULATIONS

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EVENTUALLY BE THAWED OUT...



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